

Hypothetical by 630kila

A/N: This takes place after another story of mine called Experimental. If you haven't already clicked the back button, you might be okay to stick around if you haven't read it, I think the characters basically recap everything from that story you need to know to understand this one. Basically Zim did stupid things and ran into some scary people who tried to kill him but couldn't quite manage it and there was a bit of a kerfuffle.

Chapter One:

The chupacabra was seven feet tall and dripping mucus. It took a step closer to Dib, snorting a gobbet of snot at him. Dib backed up. His heart was pounding in his chest.

"I have found you," the chupacabra growled, in a voice like grinding steel. "You have exploited my children and taken my food, and I will suck the brains from your head and tear your carcass to the four winds."

"No, you won't!" Dib said, flinging one arm in a dramatic skyward point. He was sweating a bit, though. He knew his 'secret weapon' wasn't exactly reliable... or good. The stink of the chupacabra filled the air. It made Dib want to gag.

"Your soul will be torn to shreds," the chupacabra said. "You will be erased from existence. And then I'll go after your family. You're just so annoying, Dib."

Dib felt his back hit the wall. The chupacabra's long rubbery snout lifted, and it began to suck in air. Dib's hair and jacket started to be drawn into the suck-stream. Maybe this plan really wasn't going to-

A shrill cry that set Dib's teeth on edge filled the air. The chupacabra turned to find the source of that horrible noise, and a flash of gleaming metal hit it in the face.

The chupacabra rolled on the ground as what looked like a ball of spindly wires flashed over it. Green blood spurted in the air. There were no screams now, only sounds of flesh tearing and punches landing.

Dib ran, darting around the pile of alien monster versus garden-variety Earth monster. He went for the zapper the chupacabra had knocked out of his hand.

He wiped the slime from the zapper off onto his shirt, grimaced at the ruination of said shirt, and turned the zapper towards the fighting pile.

Something shot out of that pile and landed at Dib's feet. It was Zim, panting for air, one arm bent at an unnatural angle. His skin was covered in blisters. He must not take kindly to chupacabra mucus.

Ah, but the chupacabra had long, deep gashes through its belly and shoulders and face, and it was pouring acid green blood onto the ground. It keened its anger towards the overcast sky.

"Ew," Dib said. "Overkill much?"

"You're. Welcome," Zim gasped.

Dib aimed the zapper and fired. The chupacabra twitched and convulsed, and fell to the ground. Dib went over and checked its vital signs. It was stone dead.

"It was stalking me for months," Dib said.

"Seems like you made it mad."

"Oh, right, everything is my fault," said Dib. He looked down at the mass of dead creature. "It's just... dead. I won." He couldn't help turning and looking at Zim, who was sitting up- ashen pale and cradling his broken arm, but very much alive.

"Well done, Dib!" Zim sneered. "You destroyed it... all on your VERY OWN!" He staggered to his feet. "I'd clap. But. *My arm is broken.*"

"Where did you learn sarcasm?" Sarcasm. Sarca-zim. Ha ha. That wasn't all that funny, Dib didn't say it aloud.

Zim deigned not to answer. He walked over and kicked the dead chupacabra.

"Don't you have any respect for the dead?" Dib asked.

Zim turned a nasty grin on him. "I'm sorry, I should leave it intact, so you can DISSECT it. IS THAT IT?"

Dib flinched. "Quiet down! I didn't make you come with me. You wanted to for whatever sicko alien reason. You weren't going to try to turn on me, were you? Is that why you're mad, it wouldn't go through with the double-cross you wanted? I knew you weren't really going to be helpful on purpose!"

Zim kicked it again. "You did exploit its children."

"Why did I expect you not to take the ugly green monster's side?"

"I care not for its revolting offspring, Dib. I told you I came with you to assess the capabilities of these creatures you're always going on about." Zim put his good hand on his hip. "My assessment: they are PATHETIC! They crumble under the first assault. Truly no threat to *me*."

Right. Zim had said that when he had volunteered to come on this mission... out of nowhere. It had sounded weird and stupid then, and it sounded weird and stupid now, but Zim was weird and stupid.

"Good for you," Dib holstered his zapper. He supposed he should take samples of the chupacabra, but it smelled bad, and it was bleeding copiously, and... he didn't want to touch it.

"Why did you let me come with you if you were just going to make *noise* about not trusting me the whole time?"

"Honestly? I was kinda hoping it would eat you."

Zim had the nerve to look offended.

Dib looked away from the chupacabra corpse at the field, the abandoned brick wall and half a fence, the dead and wet grass that still had bits of snow in it, the cold gray sky. Everything was so normal and quiet now.

A gust of wind blew, whipping at Dib's face. Zim, who was only wearing his usual silly uniform, shivered and hugged himself with his good arm and for a moment looked very small, tired and lost. He probably literally had no idea how to get home from here.

"I'm calling the Swollen Eyeballs to let them know about the new specimen," Dib said. He took out his cell phone.

"Mm." Zim shuddered and started walking away. "Well, I'd best be going."

"No, stay, they'd love to meet you," Dib said, out of obligation more than anything else. Zim just glared at him.

Swollen Eyeball operatives never wanted to hang around talking to Dib for very long and today he was fine with that.

He had forgotten who he'd brought with him on this trip, and he jumped in shock when he walked up to the campsite and Zim was sitting there huddled under a blanket, looking windburnt and trying to dry out his boots over a small and sickly-looking excuse for a campfire.

"Oh," Dib said. "You."

"Me," Zim grunted, one antenna flicking as if to bat off a fly.

Dib sat down across from Zim, the place where he was farthest from the alien while still being next to the fire. "I had towels and moist towelettes. Where'd they go?"

"I used them all. Then I burned them."

"I'm covered in chupacabra mucus!"

"So am I! *Still!* Bring more things next time!"

Dib scowled. He took a squashed and funky-smelling meal bar out of his jacket pocket and started to eat it. It was dry and gross.

The fire was small and giving off a lot of smoke. "You couldn't do any better? I thought you were really into fire."

"Everything's wet! I'd like to see you do better! Also, my arm is broken!"

Dib had forgotten about that. "Fine." Dib didn't feel motivated to try to do better. The fight with the chupacabra had wrenched his shoulder, and his feet hurt from walking around trying to find the thing all day. "You know, I didn't invite you to come with me."

"I know that!"

"You invited yourself!"

"I know that, I was there!"

Dib's eyes narrowed. "And your reasons for wanting to come are pretty weak, Zim. Is this part of some new evil plan of yours?"

Zim looked down at the ground, his entire body slumping and his antennae falling flat against the back of his head. "No..."

Dib raised an eyebrow. "Oh. Um, okay. Are you all right?"

"Hm?"

"You just... kind of wilted."

"Me?" Zim sat bolt upright and his eyes got crazy... er, crazier. "I am an Irken Invader! I am the most elite of the elite and you-"

"Okay! Okay." Dib really didn't want to deal with this right now.

"I'll have plans!"

"Okay!"

"So many plans! And they'll be good plans! Amazing plans! NONE CAN PLAN LIKE-"

"SHUT UP!"

"I have plans," Zim said. "You cannot DREAM of-"

"Zim, seriously, stop! Okay! You have plans. You're an evil mastermind. I get it."

Zim nodded, staring at Dib with a desperate intensity in his huge buggy eyes (which were glistening in the firelight in a most unsettling way).

Dib studied that intensity for a moment. "You know, it's been a while since I had to stop you. Zim?"

"Yes, I am Zim."

"I know you're- guh. I mean. You don't have... planner's block, or something, do you?"

"Of course not, don't be silly." Zim turned away, closing his eyes.

"Huh. Okay." Dib finished his meal bar, dropped the paper wrapper into the fire, and stood up, stretching. "I'm going to bed," he said, and walked toward the tent. Zim showed up at the tent flap, right next to Dib.

"What are you doing?" Dib said.

Zim blinked, as if actually surprised by this question. "Hm? I'm going in the-" He motioned towards the tent flap.

"You are not going in my tent!"

"It's cold out," Zim said with less force than Dib would have expected.

It was pretty cold. "I don't care. Next time, bring your own tent."

"But, I-" Zim tossed his head. "Okay. Sure."

He'd given up way too easily, and clearly was therefore up to something, but Dib didn't care. He went into the tent, crawled into his sleeping bag and was asleep almost immediately.

Dib woke up in the dark with a full bladder. He reached out for his glasses and froze. Something was digging into his upper back- something that felt like metal. A gun? No, too smooth and too big to be the barrel of a gun.

Wait just a darn minute, that was a Pak. Dib sat up and felt around on the ground right next to him- his hand came down on a pile of blankets covering something soft and warm.

Dib slammed his elbow into the blanket pile and was rewarded by a drowsy honk of protest. Zim fidgeted around, snuffling. Dib couldn't see what he was doing- it was pitch black in the tent.

"What are you doing?" Dib asked.

"S cold."

"You're right next to me!"

"So cold. No room. You were sleeping."

"You sound like you were sleeping. I thought you didn't... oh, you were sleeping off your broken arm."

"Mm."

Alien biology. Whatever.

Dib got up, picked his way over the pile of already re-comatose alien and stumbled outside. The freezing air hit him like a knife. He found a good tree to pee on and went back to the tent to find his sleeping bag and Zim's blanket gathered together in the middle of the tent in one snoring heap.

Dib dug the Irken out of the heap of bedding and threw him out of the tent into the cold where he landed with a thump and a squeal. Dib crawled back into bed and heard a crunch as he lay down on top of his glasses.

The next time he woke up it was still dark, and Zim's sharp little heels were digging into his sides.

"Oh come on," Dib mumbled. "If you're going to crawl into someone's bed without permission take your shoes off first."

Zim thrashed around, elbowing Dib in the ribs. His breathing was harsh and ragged.

"Get out of my tent!" Dib aimed a kick and hit... something... maybe just blankets. Zim whimpered and rolled over. Dib tried to catch hold of him, but he was squirming around too much.

"This is my tent. mine. come on. I just want to sleep-"
Zim screeched and Dib recoiled.

"Get your hands off," Zim cried, flipping around. "No, I said no, don't do this, don't *hurt me!*"
Dib fumbled around until he found a grip on Zim's shoulders and then started to shake. "Wake up!"

"HELP! GIR! HELP! *HELP!*"

"I'M TRYING!"

Zim started screaming wordlessly, over and over, as if confronted with a legion of undead. Dib felt around in the darkness until he found the side of Zim's face, and then he slapped it, hard. The noise stopped.
Dib found his heart was racing, as if something scary had happened. Well. It was startling to be woken up by a noisy alien.

Zim was breathing raggedly, as if recovering from sobs. "I, I was back, and they, I was, I-"

"Stop. Shh."

"They, they were gunna kill me, and it, and it was cold, and I-"

"Shh. Okay, I get it. It's cold out. You can stay... in the tent. All right? Don't pull that again! *Don't!*"

Zim went still and quiet.

Dib pushed him away and rolled onto his side.

Zim continued to be quiet but Dib felt wide awake now. His heart wouldn't seem to calm down.

"What were you dreaming about?" he said. "Not me, by any chance..."

Zim cleared his throat. "You wish. Irkens don't dream, Dib."

"Why were you screaming?"

"A clever ruse, to gain entry to your tent!"

"Right. Of course."

Dib took deep, slow breaths, trying to get himself to sleep.
He was almost there when he heard choked sobs.

The walk back home was a long one, and a cold one, and the rolled-up tent was very heavy on Dib's back.

Dib had had a few bad nightmares in his life, and he'd woken up sweating a few times, even puked once (after the 'fountain of pus' dream...) but he didn't wake up screaming. Which was good, Gaz would have frowned on that.

After about an hour of walking in silence, Dib decided to break the ice.

"Okay, so... it's no secret that I'll ridicule you mercilessly for whatever had you so worked up last night. But we both know I'll find out eventually, so you might as well tell me!"

Zim looked totally blank. "I don't know what you mean..."

Dib adjusted his glasses (he'd totaled them when he rolled over on them, he'd bound up the frames with duct tape but couldn't do anything about the cracks in the lenses that obscured his vision). "You were 'back'? Someone was 'gonna kill you?"

Zim paled visibly and turned his face away. "Irkens don't dream. I don't know what you could possibly be talking about."

"Was it me? Did I finally expose you for the horrible menace you are, did I rip your guts out of your chest?"

Zim rolled his eyes. "Guts come out of the belly, Dib. Not the chest."

"Whatever. Good to know. Were you melting in the rain?"

"Please."

"Fused to a side of meat?"

"Come on!"

"I'll find out, you know."

Zim's eyes narrowed. "There is nothing. To find out."

"Whatever. All right. Things that creep you out. Let's see. Dogs. Meat. Air. People. Dirt. Germs. Disease. Did you dream you had some kind of horrible flesh-eating illness?"

Zim avoided eye contact. "No."

"You did!"

"No! I told you I didn't dream anything!"

"So a flesh-eating illness-"

"No!"

"And someone killing you."

"I said no!"

"And you were back somewh- oh." Dib smacked himself in the forehead. "Man! This is so obvious!"

"What? What's obvious? Nothing's obvious."

"General Labs."

Zim sucked his lower lip into his mouth.

"I dreamed about them too a few times," Dib mused. "I didn't scream, though."

Zim stared straight ahead, continuing to bite his lip. A drop of blood ran down his chin.

"Oh man. They really upset you." Dib frowned. "I've been after you for years, and you're not all wigged out about *me*. Do you not think I'll really do it? You don't think I'll really kill you someday, do you? You don't trust m-"

"Not everything is about you!" Zim cried. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "Ow!"

"I just don't understand what your big deal was with them. I mean... you experiment on people all the time."

"Unh." Zim looked away. "I don't want to talk about it."

"But why would you-" Zim did an about-face and started walking very quickly away from Dib. "Hey!" Dib called, holding out one hand in a 'stop' gesture. "Wait... I..."
He let his hand fall to his side. Why was he bothering?

He walked into the house and Gaz was sitting there parked in front of the TV with a book. She was reading *and* watching TV? And there was an earpiece plugged into her ear.

"I said," she said, "now is *not* the time for-"
She turned a page in her book. Her eyes burned in her face and Dib recoiled. "I said, Iggin, you will *not* throw that jarate."

Dib cleared his throat. "Gaz, I'm home."

She looked at him, then looked away. "Iggin, your life is over," she said.

Dib shrugged and went upstairs, heading straight for the shower.
After the shower he headed into his bedroom and sat down in front of his laptop. He opened it up. He'd been gone three days, his inbox must be full of Swollen Eyeball messages by now.

The screen was black and covered in white letters.

DID YOU THINK YOU COULD HIDE FROM US DIB
YOUR END IS NEAR

"Great," Dib muttered.

A/N: I know Jhonen has said Irkens don't sleep. The first fic was written before I knew they absolutely don't sleep, so I figured I might as well keep going with the same 'rules' I had in that one.

Chapter Two:

Zim cracked his knuckles, looking down at the creature strapped to the table. It was about as long as his forearm, and staring off into space.

Funny. Those eyes looked sentient. He almost went to ask someone about that, but it was his first day on this job and he had to make a good impression! Asking questions didn't make a good impression, it made the impression that he didn't know what he was doing! He wanted to make Invader some day, after all! No- not "wanted to," "was going to" would be more accurate. And he wanted to do it as fast as possible.

What did it matter if the thing was sentient anyway? He'd been assigned to dissect it, and he was going to dissect it. He picked up a scalpel, took a deep breath, and saluted for good luck. With the hand holding the scalpel. Ow. Oops. He pulled the tool away, gingerly feeling the cut he'd made along his temple, and glanced around to see if anyone had noticed the mistake. He was alone in the room. Huh! He'd never get used to that, after the crowded Academy.

He looked down at the scalpel and saw his own translucent pink blood on the blade. He yelped and very quickly cleaned off the instrument. That looked really freaky, his own blood on a scalpel. Yikes. Zim wasn't the one being dissected here.

Zim leaned over the test subject and cut that instead. It started screaming in pain after only a tiny cut and he recoiled, crying out himself.

That would have gotten him dinged on an evaluation, big time. Well, he'd only done this in simulations! Sims didn't scream!

It wouldn't stop, either, and its eyes, what was that *look*? He wondered if anyone would notice if he just put it back and said he'd dissected it. Yes, okay, they'd notice.

He clutched the scalpel so hard it almost broke. He was shivering and had broken out in a cold sweat. Huh! He wanted to be an Invader, didn't he? They had to do this all the time and by *Irk* they *liked* it.

There was a simple solution here. He slit the creature's throat to shut it up-
-then he wrenched himself back to his present-day consciousness, and turned off the memory playback.

Zim looked down at his shaking hands. His meat brains hadn't remembered one second of that. How had he gotten to be looking so far back in his memories, anyway? He'd sat down to do this with the intention of deleting the memory files that were obviously corrupted. The ones that were playing back at him all the time, like they had last night. That was an old one, he hadn't thought of that in almost a century. He'd been practically still a boy there. No- no no- a smect. Smect. He didn't need to be thinking in human, this was his base.

He never intended to watch that memory again. He pressed delete and felt a jolt as the command traveled from the computer interface into his connected Pak, which was still connected to Zim. Taking it off for this would have been a little stupid- this could take hours.

He took his gloves off to wipe his sweaty hands on his uniform. He took a minute for some of the clammy feeling to subside a little and then he took a deep breath and scrolled through dates. What he wanted (or more accurately did not want) had only happened a few months ago. There. This might be it. He clicked on it.

Oh no not this one he didn't want to watch this one this was only a week ago but he was sunk into it now- and it was so much fresher than the old one he'd just watched, and so much harder to pull out of-

The frog was splayed out on the table in front of him.

Frog dissection. This would have been five-year-old level on Irk (albeit only on a simulator). Humans didn't get to do it until adolescence- huh? No wonder they were all awful. This would be so easy. Zim cracked his knuckles and picked up his scalpel.

"I'm glad I got you for a partner." Aki said. "You're the best lab partner ever. You do everything I don't have to do any of it."

"U'h bah." Story of Zim's life. He looked down at the frog and got ready to cut into it. Easy as cake. Sit open the frog, take out the organs, he'd done this a million times. Why was his pulse so loud?

"Are you gonna do it?" Ew, I can't watch. Guh-ross. I don't know how you have the stomach for it."

"Please, this is nothing." Humans now- they were gooey and gross and large. This would have been so much more difficult with a human, or a mouse, or a- one of those- mammals.

Funny. Zim hadn't actually dissected anything in weeks. He reached up to adjust his wig, which was getting damp and heavy with sweat- ow. He'd accidentally used the hand with the scalpel in it. He looked at the tiny smudge of his own blood that had appeared on the blade.

Aki was looking at him. What? What was her problem? "Zim, are you okay?"

"Yes, of course I am! Don't be stupid!" He cut into the frog and oh yeah, there was the familiar feeling of blade through flesh, and, and...

He clapped his hand over his mouth and grabbed the table with the other hand. Everything was getting fuzzy.

"Zim? Zim! Miss Bitters, I think Zim needs to see the nurse!"

"Nope." He hung his head, taking deep breaths. "I... it's just... it's just a *frog*."

Present-day Zim finally managed to pull himself out of this and stop the memory. He collapsed in his seat, panting shallowly. He put his fingers to the side of his neck, checking his rapid pulse. Just a frog. It had been pre-killed and everything.

He deleted that memory (not that there was much use of that, at least, not at the moment; it was still very clear in his mind and didn't require the Pak backup) and stood up, wobbling just a little. Well, enough of this, he had real work to do, after all! Sure he did. Like... well, like something.

He headed for the elevator to the house level.

It was an hour or so later that Dib marched down Zim's front walk and pounded on the door, open laptop balanced on one hip. When there was no answer, he pounded on the door again. He heard a muffled cry from inside the base: "Go away! I'm not seeing anyone today!"

Dib tried the door; it was open. He walked in. Zim wasn't in the living room and neither was that creepy little robot of his. Dib went into the kitchen. Zim was sitting at the table, hunched over a steaming mug of... something, probably not coffee or tea because of the water thing. But maybe it was *alien* coffee or tea.

"Get out!" Zim snapped. "Get out right now!"

Dib showed off the laptop screen. "What's this?"

Zim scotted: "How should I know?" He glanced over each shoulder and up at the ceiling. This was possibly not relevant to the situation at hand; Zim had been rather jumpy lately and Dib hadn't been able to get him to say why so far.

"Didn't you send it to me?"

"No! Get out of my house!"

Dib took mental note of the fact that Zim had called his base- his *Earth* base- 'home'. Again. That was the tenth time this month. Dib cringed every time. "It seriously wasn't you!"

"No!" Zim's teeth were showing and he was leaning forward in his seat, hands planted on the table, back and shoulders tense. Dib backed up, just in case he got the idea to throw what was probably a scalding drink. "Get out of my house, you little-" He stopped, twitching his antennae and looking off to the side. "What's that smell?"

"Oh, shut up! I just took a shower!"

Zim drummed his fingers on the table. He flicked his tongue in and out like a snake.

Dib looked back at the message on his screen. This was more important than just a creepy message- the threatening words were all the screen would display- the system was completely locked up. Dib couldn't get the computer to restart, turn off, or do anything at all.

"HIGH EXPLOSIVES!" Zim screamed. He ran out of the room.

"What?" Dib ran after him. "What are you talking about?"

The blast hit as they were going out the front door. Dib was thrown a few feet. He landed on his laptop, which shattered and jabbed into his ribs. The noise made Dib's ears ring. Dib sat up and studied his broken laptop. It was completely broken in half.

"Just great." Dib muttered, and couldn't hear himself speak because his ears were still ringing. His ribs were sore but didn't seem to be cut.

He turned to see Zim's base flattened to the ground. His jaw dropped.

Zim was sitting on the ground, shaking and pale and screaming over and over again. Dib couldn't hear that, either. He felt chilled. Was he deaf now?

As he stood there, his busted laptop dangling from one hand and his coat flapping around his legs in the early spring breeze, the ringing began to fade, which was good, but in its place was Zim's hysterical screeching, which was bad.

"Stop it." Dib said. Zim didn't stop. Dib went over and kicked him and he curled up, gasping, the screaming cut off.

"Did you do this?" Dib said.

Zim staggered to his feet. "Me? My own base?" He sounded hoarse. Maybe he'd finally hit the critical scream level that hurt his throat. Maybe he'd be forced to shut up for a few blessed days. "You..."

"Was there something in your basement that you left alone or made GIR watch or whatever? You blow yourself up a lot."

Zim looked at the flattened base. "My base!"

"Well, it used to be."

"My beautiful base!" Zim fell to his knees, grabbing his antennae and wringing them.

"Does that hurt when you do that?"

Zim whimpered. He went over and started pawing through the debris.

Dib looked at his laptop screen. It had changed, despite the laptop being completely broken.

ONE DOWN, ONE TO GO

"U'h, hm." The little hairs on the back of Dib's neck were standing up. "I think I'd better go home."

He walked down the front walk and then *ran* down the sidewalk.

He was breathing hard when he got to his house, his heart pounding. Everything looked fine, maybe.

There was a loud *boom* and smoke billowed out of Dib's bedroom window. "AAH!"

Gaz walked out the front door. She stared up at the smoking window, then looked over at Dib. Her eyes were wide.

She scowled.

Dib ran over and grabbed her wrist, pulling her down the front walk. "I will destroy you," she said. "But your pain will never end. You will scream for the sweet release that will never."

There was a second explosion. Dib threw Gaz to the ground and flopped down on top of her.

She threw him off. He landed a few feet down the sidewalk. She got up and turned to survey what was left of the house. There were two huge holes where the living room and Dib's bedroom should be. Well, it was nothing worse than stuff that had happened before, but it was bad.

"I have a Bloodguts tournament tonight," she said. "I've been waiting *W-I-L-K-S* for it."

"Oh man," Dib said. "Oh man. Now what?"

"If I don't have a SlayStation to play on."

Dib pointed at the wreckage. "*My research, Gaz! My life's work!*"

Gaz grabbed his shirt. "*My reputation!*"

"*THE FUTURE OF THE PLANET EARTH!*"

"*THE FUTURE OF YOUR LIFE!*"

Dib pulled out his cell phone. "Okay. Okay! I'm calling Dad! Maybe he has a back-up of the house."

Gaz opened one eye. "A back-up? What are you *talking* about?"

"I- I don't know, like he copied it or cloned it or-"

"You think he made a back-up copy of our house?"

"I don't know! He's Dad!" Dib put the phone to his ear. "Dad! Dad! Dad! The house blew up! Dad! It went to voice mail!"

"Now what?" Gaz growled.

Dib glanced down at the laptop screen.

DARN IT

DARN IT

OKAY WE'RE OUT OF BOMBS JUST HOLD STILL WHILE WE GET THE SNIPER

Dib blinked.

The text changed.

DON'T TELL HIM THAT

It changed again.

THAT WAS JUST A DEMONSTRATION DIB THE NEXT BOMBS WILL GO OFF WHEN YOU ARE ACTUALLY IN YOUR HOUSE

"We need to get out of here," Dib said.

"Why?" Gaz said.

"Because-" Dib had an epiphany of the kind that only comes once in a lifetime. "Because there's a SlapStation at our secret vacation house. And it has Bloodguts on it."

He expected Gaz to jump on that right away, but instead she turned her death gaze on him. He froze.

"And is that *really* the only reason?"

"Sure, of course. Look, the garage is fine!"

A few months ago, Dad had gotten Gaz a car. He had not set aside the time to teach her to drive it (though she probably could have figured it out on her own). She had no interest in the car, as she had nowhere much to go, and had let Dib use it (never mind that Dib had no license and no one had technically taught him to drive either, oh well, he hadn't gotten caught yet) which was rather generous for Gaz.

He went to the garage now, opening it up. According to the weird screen messages, there were no more bombs. Still, they should probably be in and out of the garage as quickly as possible. Tak's ship would have been another option. He considered it, maybe its tech would help him with the laptop problem, but there wouldn't be a whole lot of room for both him and Gaz in it.

"Hey!"

Dib whipped around. Zim was standing in the doorway.

"What are you doing here?" Gaz said.

"The Dib ran away before I could question him properly," Zim said. He'd rounded up GIR at some point; the robot was standing there next to him, dog-suited. "I notice your house appears to be largely missing. Either you horribly mishandled the explosives or it wasn't you who blew up my base."

"Nice detective work," Dib said, rolling his eyes.

Zim nodded curtly. "I know. Where are you going?"

"We have a vacation home up north," Gaz volunteered before Dib could stop her. "Dib owes me a SlayStation."

"I see." Zim scratched the underside of his chin. "GIR! Begin beta sequence."

Dib shook his head. "Oh geez no."

GIR did a quick warm-up stretch and then tipped his head back, yelling "TAKE US WITH YOU!"

"No!"

"WE DON'T HAVE ANY HOME ANYMORE!"

"No no no! Get out!"

"WE'VE LOST AND HOMELESS!" GIR put his face in his paws, sobbing. This might have been more effective if he wasn't so terrible-smelling and creepy. "PLEASE HELP US!"

Zim looked completely impassive. Dib sighed.

Gaz opened one eye. "Make it stop."

"I LOVES YOU GAZZY!" GIR squealed.

Both Gaz's eyes were opened now. "No."

Zim yanked on GIR a little. "GIR, that isn't part of the sequence."

"I WANT TOOOO HAVE - HIDEOUS CYBORG BABIES! BABIES I CAN EAT!"

Zim cuffed GIR on the side of the head.

"He is *not* coming," Gaz said. "Either of them."

"Hm," Dib replied.

"What *hm*?"

"How about if I do your chores for the next month?"

"I can make you do my chores whenever I want," she said with the faintest ghost of a smirk.

He rolled his eyes. "Three months."

"Why do you even want them to come? I thought you hated them more than I do."

"I think there's something wrong with Zim. He's been weird for a while now." Dib's eyes narrowed. "And he knows it! Look at him sweating! Huh? Huh?"

Zim looked from Gaz to Dib and back again, sucking his lower lip into his mouth.

"And he needs us," Dib continued. "He's got no disguise on. He must have lost it. That means we'll have the upper hand."

"Make it six months, they stay away from me, and I can hurt them however I want," Gaz said.

"Well, *of course you can*," Dib snapped.

Gaz considered. "And I have control of the TV for the next month."

Dib's jaw dropped. "But... but..."

"He is sweating," Gaz noticed.

Dib snorted. "Fine, I have the Internet. All right! You can-"

Zim and GIR were already in the backseat.

Dib got in the driver's seat and Gaz took shotgun. Dib pulled out onto the road. Gaz took her Gameslave out of her pocket and started losing herself in it.

"Dib?"

Dib looked up at the rearview mirror and saw Zim looking back at him. Just his eyes were framed by the mirror and, maybe because Dib was a bit in shock and had been up most of last night, he was struck by Zim's appearance as if seeing the alien for the first time- and as an alien, not someone he had regular conversations with and knew almost like another person- he looked like an exotic insect, sort of rainforest-colored, and very much inhuman, and it was really kind of staggering that this weird bug creature could comprehend and engage in human conversation. That was part of the wonder of the paranormal, really- the levels of humanity from human to meta-human to hybrid human to whatever Zim was, obviously not human, but able in some way to relate to humanity.

Dib shook himself and said "Yeah, what do you want?"

"I will remember this," Zim said in a low hiss, narrowing his eyes. Just the fact that an alien could understand concepts like memory, and display human expressions, and

Dib shook himself again. Man he was tired. "You do that." He had no idea what Zim even meant by that.

Professor Membrane had built the secret vacation house in case his children ever were too much in the public eye and he thought they needed to be quickly hidden for whatever reason. So far, that hadn't happened and didn't seem too likely to ever happen, judging from the total lack of interest in Dib and Gaz from the world, so they used it for the times Dad had a few days off and decided he would take a vacation with the kids. That didn't happen often and it hadn't happened in a few years. Hopefully the house was still there. Wasn't there someone they paid to go check on it every so often?

Dib supposed they would find out.

Now who were these people after him? Why were they after him?

The list of paranormal entities that might be annoyed with Dib was a long one. The list of paranormal entities that might also be simultaneously annoyed with Zim was shorter. (Dib wasn't accustomed to taking non-paranormal entities into account.) There was any living relative of the chupacabra, and there was the werewolf the two of them had hunted last month. There was no mystery about why Zim had helped with the werewolf- it had dug up all the laser gnomes in Zim's yard and then crapped on the front walk and peed everywhere.

Did werewolves know how to use technology? Hmm-

"Cow," GIR mumbled from the backseat.

Zim started, "Hin' Eh? Yes. Cow."

"My cow," GIR cooed.

"No, GIR." Zim said with an odd air of patience. "All cows belong to me."

"Shut up," Gaz said.

It was going to be a three-hour trip, Dib realized.

Chapter Three:

Every second of the Tallest's time was of absolute crucial importance

By even deigning to speak with the Irken on the screen, they were doing her a huge favor, even if she was working for them, and they could even totally have her killed if she didn't appreciate them enough or they got bored. This was a total nobody, too. She wasn't even an Invader or anything. Red didn't know what her story was. She had been sensible enough not to talk about herself.

Red didn't even remember her name. Chack or something. He didn't care. He didn't have to care about her, he was the Tallest. All he knew was that she was sane and decently competent, and therefore could be allowed to investigate this stuff. Also, she was totally unimportant, and if the thing she was investigating was as serious as it was supposed to be (which it probably wasn't), and she got killed, then whatever.

He picked up the report she'd given them, holding it where she could see it. "So. Everything in here is true, eh?"

"Yes, my Tallest. Every detail in my report is as true as I can verify it to be."

Red narrowed his eyes slightly. She was one of those who talked with a faint accent because Red didn't know. Irkens didn't have regional dialects, she must think it made her sound classy or intimidating or whatever. He didn't care why. He just cared that it was annoying. "Well, soldier. I hope you know what you have to do."

She nodded. "Take no prisoners." There was faint relish in her voice.

"Good." Red tilted his head back, raising his eyebrows. "Now, you probably know there's another Irken on that planet." Her lips got tight. "We're sending him to help with your mission."

"I see," she ground out.

Purple was grinning. He liked this part. "And if he gets in your way, you can kill him!"

She looked much more pleased now.

The first fifteen minutes went uneventfully. Gaz played her game. GIR and Zam traded inane comments about what was out the window... and then it started.

"So Dib. Tell me what happened to my base."

"It exploded." Dib didn't take his eyes off the road. "You were there. I know, you know what explosions are."

"Why did it explode?"

"I was about to ask you that."

"I didn't blow up my own house!"

"Except you didn't *just* blow up your own house!" Zim kicked his seat. He could kick hard. "Ow! Okay. Fine. I think it was werewolves."

"Werewuuuuulves?"

"Yeah, it's the only thing that makes sense."
Zim scooped and tossed his hands in the air.

"Stop talking," Gaz said.

"I was done trying to speak to this *ape* anyway," Zim said.

"Good. Stop. Now."

"Look! Clouds!" GIR squealed.

"Unh huh," Zim muttered.

Dib pulled out his cell phone and tried to get in touch with Dad. He connected this time.
"Dad! Dad, there's been—"

"I can't chat right now, son! I've just learned about a horrible betrayal of my SCIENCE! If you need anything, please contact your uncle Jed!"

He hung up.

Dib had not been aware he had an uncle.

Zim was sitting folded up and tense in the backseat, obviously uncomfortable. "Dib," he said.

"Yeah."

"GIR is look at him!"

"What?" GIR had taken off his dog suit and was folding and unfolding it. "He looks... kinda normal, I guess. Considering."

"No. He's, uh... he's very unstable! He'll destroy your car! You need to let him out!"

Dib studied Zim's pale face in the rearview mirror. "Are you getting carsick?"

"Me? Ha."

"Because if you're gonna throw up, I will let you out of the car. You don't need to make up weird things about GIR."

Zim huffed a little.

Dib called the Swollen Eyeball Network. He got a busy signal.

A busy signal. Dib hadn't heard one of those since he was six.

Zim looked fidgety.

"Zim, if you're carsick, please just tell me," Dib said. "I don't like aliens paking in my car. I will pull over. I won't even make fun of you."

"I'm not allergic to Earth vehicles. That's stupid."

"Okay."

Dib tried to call the SEN again. Nothing. He might not be able to contact them without Internet access.

Zim was staring out the window, wringing his hands. GIR was rocking back and forth, humming softly.

They were on a nice, empty stretch of road with wide shoulders. Enh. Dib would just pull over. Just in case.

He pulled over. Zim immediately ripped the door open and leaned out, retching.

Dib rubbed at his temples. "Okay, we've been in the car twenty minutes now, and you're acutely carsick. We have two hours and forty minutes more of driving."

Zim coughed and scrubbed at his mouth with the back of his hand. He was shaking. "You said," he croaked, "you wouldn't mock me."

"I'm not mocking you. I'm just pointing out that it's going to be a really long trip if I have to pull over every twenty minutes to let you vomit."

"Put him in the trunk," Gaz suggested.

Zim let out a deep breath, letting his head hang. "It's not... it's... the stench."

"I can roll down the window."

Zim scooted back inside the car and shut the door. Dib rolled down the windows. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Of course I am."

"Right. Okay." Dib pulled back onto the road. "I guess it's not possible to puke forever anyway. You're not that big, either. You'll run out of vomit."

"Nnnh."

"I'm getting hungry," Gaz said.

Dib blinked slowly.

About twenty minutes later, when they reached the next city, Dib went through a drive-thru and got Gaz a burger and GIR a dollar menu chicken sandwich. Zim was curled up in the backseat, being silent. Dib did not trust this silence, but at least there hadn't been any more incidents.

Dib tried to call the Swollen Eyeball Network again and got through to Agent Robot Vampire. He tried not to audibly sigh in relief. Robot Vampire was a good agent. He was cool. He had a mutant ear in one cheek that could only understand German.

"Agent Mothman. It's not usual for you to call from your cell phone. What is the haps?"

"There's been an incident. My house was partially destroyed in an explosion. I'm fleeing to an undisclosed location right now. The Spider is with me. His base was destroyed. Totaled."

There was a sudden cry from the backseat. "I know you're talking about me!"

Dib ignored him. "Has there been any recent werewolf activity near my house?"

Zim sat up in the backseat, looking disheveled and flushed. "I know. The Spider is Zim!"

"Shut up," Dib said. "No, not you, Robot Vampire."

"Hm. I'll check on that activity." Robot Vampire said, ignoring the gaffe. "Good agent. Good man."

Zim wouldn't shut up. "You call me that to my *face* sometimes, you know! I have a name!"

"I know your name!" Dib snapped. "You only scream it at me every other sentence!"

"LIAR!"

"This is you! I'm Zim and I'm going to take over the Earth by being Zim cuz I'm Zim and also I'm stupid!"

"Shut up," Gaz said.

Dib shut up.

"I don't sound like that at all. The Dib has gone mad," Zim said, turning to GIR.

GIR was giggling "He's makin' fun of how you yell all the time!"

"I do not."

"You yell at me! ALL THE TIME!"

"Maybe if you *listened* to me, I wouldn't have to~"

"You yell about how you're Zim? But I knooooow!"

Zim shook his head.

"I live in your house!" GIR added.

"Okay." Robot Vampire said in Dib's ear. "There is in fact a recent report of werewolves sighted in your neighborhood. Very astute, Mothman."

Dib knew he was astute. Nice of Robot Vampire to be willing to admit it. "I'll have to keep my eyes peeled. Make sure everyone's advised, Robot Vampire."

"Got it."

"Mothman out."

Dib hung up.

GIR was squishing Zim's face between his hands. "I knowow!" he was saying. "I knooooooooowwwwwwww Boop!"

Zim looked depressed. "GIR .."

"Boop! Boop! Boop!"

"I'm gonna throw up."

Dib pulled over. Zim opened the door and leaned out, panting.

Talking to Agent Robot Vampire - who was something of a legend for his mutant car - had jogged Dib's brain a little. Zim had recently had not one - but two - close paranormal encounters. Before that, he'd been entangled in some shady science experiment deal, and he'd been living on a foreign planet for the past three years. He was at high risk for mutations. Dib would have to examine him when there was an opportune time to do so. Mutating would explain Zim's recent anxiety and general strangeness, as well as last night's attack of paranoia and today's nausea and vomiting - though the latter was probably plain old travel sickness. Zim could be bizarrely fragile. (Dib checked himself for mutation daily. So far he hadn't caught anything.)

He waited, drumming his fingers on the dashboard. Zim gagged for a bit - it sounded very violent and painful - and then pulled himself back into the car, lying down with his head in GIR's lap.

"Aw," GIR said, gently stroking Zim's antennae. "He likes me."
Zim made an incoherent noise of dismissal.

"So antenna touching isn't sexual at all I guess?" Dib asked.

Gaz was looking right at him, eyes wide. "Wh- what?"

Dib shrugged. He thought it was a perfectly reasonable question. "Some agents in the network have theorized about-"

"No," Gaz said. "Never. Never- never say 'sex' again!"

Zim sat up, rubbing his eyes. "What? Huh?"
GIR was clapping and squealing.

"Never mind," Dib said. This wasn't worth it. He'd always been pretty sure Zim's species was asexual anyway. "This subject will have to wait."
Gaz was still staring at him. Dib didn't understand what her problem was. He was a scientist after all.

There were two hours left until they could expect to reach their destination.

Zim was lethargic and despondent for the rest of the trip, lying in the backseat at the tender mercies of GIR, who apparently couldn't decide whether he wanted to comfort Zim or harass him. He cycled through holding Zim's head, poking him in the face, planting sloppy kisses on him (Zim didn't seem to appreciate that), and yanking on his antennae.

"That doesn't bother you?" Dib asked Gaz, who was quietly playing her game while Zim velped.

"No," she said.

"Should I put GIR in the trunk or something?"

"No."

"You could trade places with him, maybe."

"I said it doesn't bother me."

"Oh. Okay." Dib looked in the rearview mirror. Zim was finally scooting over to the far end of the seat, trying to avoid GIR. GIR looked offended.

Dib pulled onto the gravel driveway leading to the secret vacation house. Finally.
Well-
It could have been worse.

The path leading to the front door was clean. The weeds weren't too bad. The paint on the walls was peeling a little but not much.

Dib got out of the car and started walking back and forth to stretch his legs.

Gaz got out, went to the front door, took the house key out from under the mat and unlocked the door.

GIR got out and followed her in. Dib would have to go and keep an eye on them in a moment. Zim didn't get out. He sat in the car, fiddling with the hem of his skirt thing and shooting sidelong glances at the house. The place had an eerie, deserted feeling. Dib could understand why Zim didn't like the looks of it, skittish as he was lately.

Understanding why Zim was upset did not mean Dib was at all sympathetic. "Oh come on," he said. "There's nothing in there. Get out of the car."

"Yes, yes, in a minute."

Dib was being a little hasty, he realized. He and Zim had a moment of privacy- no Gaz to take issue with things, no GIR to defend Zim- and now might be a good opportunity to check Zim for mutations. "Hey," he said, "I've noticed you're a little weird lately."

"I am not."

"You were practically passed out on the way here."

"I was sick from your horrible car."

"Well... whatever. Thing is, you're a high mutation risk."

That got Zim's attention. "Me? No? Of course not. What is this mutation risk you speak of?"

Dib sat down next to Zim. "You've been exposed to lots of things that could make you mutate and I want to check you for anything of that type."

Zim shook his head, edging away. "You are not to examine me!"

"I promise on my honor as a paranormal investigator that I'm just going to check you for mutations and that's it. Look, GIR's right in the house. If I try anything on you, call him out here and he'll blow me up."

Zim was considering this.

"If you do have an uncaught mutation," Dib said, "you could die, you know. Before you even know there's anything wrong!" However, before that, he could turn into a violent, mindless killing machine and destroy a bunch of innocent people, which was why Dib was willing to be p try to find any dangerous mutations instead of just letting Zim die.

"What does this examination entail?"

"I'm just gonna look you over a little- it's not going to teach me anything about your physical structure. Here- I'll start by looking at your head." Dib leaned forward, pressing on Zim's forehead, cheeks and temples- extra eyes or mouths showing up in those places were a common and mostly harmless form of mutation. "Does this hurt?"

Zim was trembling a little. "No, not at all."

"Let me know if anything hurts." This was made a little easier by Zim not having hair- a little harder because Dib didn't know if there were any changes to the antennae he should be looking out for. "Is this the normal consistency of your antennae?"

"Uh... yes..."

Dib felt the sides of Zim's neck. No gills or anything. His shoulders were normal too, well, as normal as usual. One of them had never healed right after a little brush with a bullet- a bullet from the same gun that had given Dib a small scar on his cheek. It made Dib a little queasy to realize he and Zim had matching scars. There were some schools of paranormal investigative thought that would suggest the two of them were somehow connected now.

The area just above Zim's Pak between his shoulder blades felt a little puffy. Dib pressed on it until Zim turned and looked over his shoulder. "What are you doing?"

"Does this hurt?"

"No. Why are you still poking me?"

"This area is a little swollen, I think."

"Hm. Feels normal. Stop poking me!"

"All right." Dib started to feel up and down Zim's sides. Zim pushed him away. "I'm looking for extra arms."

"I can examine myself from here."

"You probably don't know what to look for."

"Yes I do." Zim ducked out of the car and headed inside. Dib shrugged. He followed Zim inside.

The inside of the house was dusty and felt empty- even though it wasn't empty- in the living room Gaz had started getting her game ready for that evening. GIR was sitting on the couch watching her. Zim stood near the door, wringing his hands. There were at least two other sentient

creatures in the house with him (GIR was iff'y on that front) and Zim was breathing audibly, and Gaz was clattering around. So why did it feel so silent?

It was probably just that Dib was tired, and not a sign of any paranormal activity in the house. He pulled out his cell phone and checked the reception. Decent. There was a functional computer downstairs last he knew. he could use that for researching the current situation.

He headed for the stairs and Zim sort of hung a few feet behind him, trying to follow him without being inconspicuous and failing utterly.

Dib let him follow. He needed to keep an eye on Zim, after all. Keep him in check.

He went down into the basement, which was even dustier and sort of cramped. The computer was in the corner of the game room, which had something kind of like a foosball table in the middle of it. Dad had modified the table and now only Gaz could figure out how to play the game. There was a tarp over the table at the moment.

Dib tried booting up the computer. It displayed a blank, sickly pale green screen for a few minutes and then switched to a normal Windows 95 screen.

Windows 95.

Dib sighed and pulled up Internet Explorer.

He made his paranormal forum rounds, keeping everyone in the loop, touching base, looking for clues to what had happened, of which he found zero.

He didn't realize he'd been online for hours until he heard Gaz yelling from upstairs that pizza had arrived. Dib went upstairs to grab a slice, and while he was there he checked on GIR and Gaz. GIR had built a cushion fort on the couch and was sitting in it. Gaz was playing video games. Everything seemed fine.

Dib went back downstairs. Zim was still there; he hadn't followed Dib upstairs. He was sitting under the not-foosball table and reading a book.

"You can read?" Dib blurted.

Zim jumped. "What?"

"You're reading a book!"

"I'm an elite Irken warrior and brilliant scientist! I've traveled more galaxies than your Earth science even knows exist!" Zim leaned out from under the table, staring at Dib as if Dib had three heads. "Did- did you honestly think I was illiterate?"

Well, no. Dib guessed not, but... but... "But you're just sitting there reading!"

Zim studied Dib a minute longer, then apparently decided this wasn't worth his time. He retreated under the table.

There was a not-great futon (with a TV next to it) by the back wall. Dib could sit on the futon and observe Zim under the game table, reading his book.

Dib took a bite of pizza. He was very tired, and had a whopping headache. He hadn't noticed before - too much to do. It was understandable though - what an intense few days.

"So here's the situation," he said. "Remember that werewolf we chased off a few weeks ago?"

"Yes," Zim hissed.

"I think that's what blew up our houses."

Zim threw his book. It skittered across the floor and hit the futon.

"I'm glad you're taking this well," Dib said.

"I could tear your throat out. You're destroying me, you know!"

"That's kind of the idea. That's always been the idea."

Zim crawled out from under the table, stretching out across the floor to retrieve his book. He withdrew back under the table, lying on his side with his back to Dib, using the book for a pillow. It didn't look very comfortable.

Dib shifted into a more comfortable position. "I didn't ask werewolves to blow up your house, you know."

"Enh."

"You could show some gratitude. I'm letting you stay with me, and I even checked you for mutations. I put up with you being carsick the whole way here."

Zim just sputtered. He was so difficult sometimes.

Dib finished the last few bites of his pizza. "By the way, That spot on your back."

"What spot on my back?"

"That swollen area just under your neck? You seemed to get a little weird about it."

"Hm." Zim reached back and patted the base of his neck. "There is nothing abnormal here."

"It seemed puffy."

"Nope, nope."

"Hm. What are you reading?"

"None of your business."

Typical.

Dib lay his head down on the arm of the couch. He couldn't actually afford to go to sleep, but it had been a long day.

The Dib was snoring. It was obnoxious.

Zim sat up, not remembering he was under a table and his head hit the leg of it. He rubbed at the resulting burst of pain in his scalp.

He crawled out from under the table and surveyed the room. It was a typical musty human basement, with the game table, the computer, Dib on the couch, a water heater in the corner of the room, concrete floor, things stacked in the back in a jumble of storage—nothing unusual. The smells were of dirt and concrete and inactivity. Nothing to worry about at a-

The water heater kicked on with a roaring noise and Zim screeched and cowered, his pulse thumping.

Lgh.

At least he hadn't woken the Dib. He smoothed back the bases of his antennae, taking a deep breath. Nothing wrong, everything fine. He needed to get those corrupted memory files out of his Pak—that had to be what was making him jumpy. Maybe he could use that outdated Earth computer in the back of the room to navigate through the files.

First, he'd better check on GIR.

Upstairs, the Gaz thing was sitting on the couch, playing a video game. The game was loud with gunshot noises and full of blood splats and the sounds of it made Zim's head vibrate painfully. GIR had made a little fort out of a nasty-smelling pizza box. He seemed fine.

Gaz was eating some kind of dry, sweet-smelling thing out of a bag. Zim hadn't found time to eat recently and he'd sicked up anything left from the last time he *had* eaten and whatever Gaz had didn't smell too bad.

"Don't distract me," Gaz said, having apparently noticed Zim coming closer to investigate the substance she was consuming.

Zim picked up the bag and looked at it.

"That's mine," Gaz said.

The bag was large and mostly full. "Caramel popcorn" was the name on the bag.

"Aren't you scared of food anyway?" she said.

"I fear no food," Zim told her. He picked up one of the oddly-shaped pieces of caramel popcorn and looked at it.

"Whatever," Gaz said.

Zim took a deep breath and touched the very tip of his tongue to the piece of caramel popcorn. Well, nothing was sizzling.

He ate three pieces of the popcorn and decided to stop there. His throat and the muscles around his belly still ached from his earlier bouts of motion sickness and he wasn't in a hurry to repeat the experience. The popcorn didn't have much of a flavor anyway.

"You're so weird," Gaz said.

"I want some popcorn," GIR said. Zim handed him the bag and left the room to investigate the rest of the house. He might be stuck here a while.

The kitchen and bathroom were completely typical of Earth homes, if a bit emptier than normal. There were two bedrooms: one with nothing in it but a set of bunk beds and the other with a large flat single bed and a lot of decor resembling Dib's father, like there was in Dib's house in town.

That was about it.

Zim went back to the living room. There was a cabinet next to the TV with some movies in it. Zim could not really care less about those if he tried.

"Go away," Gaz said. Zim had no reason not to oblige her.

He wanted out onto the front steps. The night air was cold and damp and he shivered. The car was exactly where it had been left. The front yard was edged by woods, woods full of rustling noises and squeaks and chirps and things. The air smelled sharp and springy and wet. Zim realized he was quite unarmed, apart from his Pak. He glanced around because humans sometimes had stacks of firewood and tools and axes and things in their yards, but such wasn't the case here. He withdrew inside.

There was another door to the outside in the kitchen. He looked through it- it was made of glass. It didn't actually lead straight outside- it led into a porch that then led outside. Zim went out on the porch. It was cold out on this side of the house too. How shocking.

He left the porch and stood outside. This side of the house didn't have woods on it, it had a hill, leading down to a lake.

Zim headed down to the edge of the lake and stood there on the shore, looking out at the vast, cold, silent expanse of water. The lake reeked of mud and dead things, dead, cold, slimy things, and if he listened close, he almost thought he could hear someone speaking in a whisper-

someone chanting. *ladybird fly away your house is gone your friends don't want you, and this place wants you even less, so go back in your hole and never come out*

Why was he doing this to himself?

He went back inside.

Okay, the computer. The one in the basement. He was going to hook himself up to it and try to fix up these problematic memory files.

He went downstairs, where Dib was still peacefully sleeping on the couch, his breathing deep and rhythmic and so easy and free. He was stiller in his sleep than he usually was.

Zim looked through the pile of things in the corner that were being stored by the humans. There were a lot of bins and board games and some more movies, and a stereo.

Here was a pool cue. It felt nice and solid in Zim's small three-fingered hands. He would keep this near him.

Zim sat down at the computer. The ports needed a little adjusting before they would connect to his Pak, but nothing too difficult.

He stared at the green-tinted screen, holding the pool cue flat in his lap and taking note of the creaks and bubbles of the house and its plumbing.

Now, where was the memory he wanted?

He looked down at his interlaced fingers. What he needed to delete were memories of the white building—those were what taunted him. It was completely out of the question to put off looking for those memories on the off chance that he would end up revisiting something unpleasant. He was an Invader, after all.

Which was why he went cycling all the way back to his memories of smoothhood—or rather, which was NOT why, because—okay. He was going farther back because Dib had jogged his memory about something. Not because he was putting off looking at the other thing.

Zim ducked out of the sensor range of the guardbot and walked into the med bay. There were rows of white platforms in here and it smelled like harsh chemicals that made his antennae bristle. Smeets were littered across the platforms, slumped in injured heaps. Zim made a mental note never to end up here.

There was Skoodge, sitting on the edge of one of the platforms, playing a handheld video game. Zim walked over to him. "Hey!"

Skoodge looked up. "Hey!"

Skoodge had a wad of bandages plastered to his back just above his Pak and he smelled of blood and chemicals. Zim sat down next to him. "When will you be out of here?"

"Oh, a day or two," Skoodge said. "It only hurt for a moment when they were doing it. But it's excruciating when my meds wear off."

"Hm."

"It's nice of you to check on me," Skoodge said. "Almost suspiciously nice! Better not get caught."

Zim wasn't really here to check on Skoodge so much as he was here out of boredom but okay whatever. "Uh huh. So you'll be out of training for a whole day?"

"Yeah. It's not really a big deal, though. You're out of training right now. When are you gonna get yours out?"

Zim evaluated the wad of bandages stuck to Skoodge's back. "Oh, I'm not."

"Huh?"

"I'm not having mine taken out, I don't want to."

"But if they start growing in later, won't they mess up your Pak and kill you?"

Zim patted the back of Skoodge's hand. "Oh Skoodge. As if. We're genetically... we're genealogically... we're..."

"Genetically engineered?"

"I was getting to that. We don't really have birth defects that will kill us if they're not taken out. It's all a test."

"But... but Red and Pur were told they don't have any..." Skoodge said. "If it was a test..."

"It's a very good test," Zim acknowledged.

Skoodge frowned. "But if we weren't genetically engineered... they wouldn't be in the way, and it would be kind of cool. The brochure said the flaw is a small price to pay for the advancements we've..."

He stopped, noticing Zim chuckling and patting his hand some more. "Skoodge. Skoodge. You're very good at following orders, aren't you?"

Skoodge looked down at the ground. "Yeah..."

"You'll make a wonderful drone someday."

Skoodge stuck his lower lip out.

Zim looked about the room. There was a purple-eyed girl sitting on the other side of the room, holding her knees and looking off into space. She had identical bandages to Skoodge's on her back. She saw Zim looking at her and glared at him. He looked away.

"Don't you have all of yours?" Skoodge was saying.

"I already told you, it's all lies. So no, I don't have *any*. But yes, they did *tell* me I have all six of them." They had apparently known Zim would be difficult to convince.

"Wow, all six? I only had two and it still hurts! No wonder you don't want 'em out!"

Zim scowled. "I'm not scared of anything!"

"I didn't say you were scared," Skoodge said, holding his palms up. "Just that you can't take pain!"

"I'll show you pain!" He slugged Skoodge on the upper arm.

"Ow."

"If I *did* have them, which is not true, they'd never grow in anyway. You had your back cut open for nothing! Why didn't you ask me about this first? You should have asked me!"

"It's kind of not optional though," Zim said. "I don't really know what they'll do when you tell them not to cut yours out," Skoodge said.

"I just won't show up. Look, Skoodge. If Red and Purple had genetic programming flawless enough to successfully remove their buds, I certainly can't have any buds. Let alone a full set of six. That would make me all but defective."

Skoodge shrugged. "I don't know. Red and Pur are kind of weird. They hatched out of the same pod, and they have weird necks. And you're so little! The little aerodynamic ones are the ones that—"

Zim hopped down to the floor. "This conversation is over!"

"But Zim," Skoodge said, "do you wanna risk it? If they do grow in, they'll probably knock your Pak clean off! And you won't be able to put it back on! And then you'll die!"

"You know I could just cut them out if they start to grow," Zim said.

"But what if you're on an alien planet? And it's horrible? And there are no surgeons?"

"I'll do it myself. Well, I'd better train G'bye Skoodge!" He started walking away.

"Oh," Skoodge said. "Okay."

"You're an idiot," the girl with purple eyes said as Zim was leaving- probably talking to Skoodge.

Zim had seen all he needed to. he stopped the memory playback.

He reached back to feel between his shoulders, just above his Pak. Oh no it was puffy there wasn't it. Oh no.

'I'll do it myself,' he'd said as a child. Smeet. Not child, smeeet.

Zim did not particularly want to cut open his own back. Surely if they *were* growing in there was some kind of pill he could take to make them stop. Surely there was nothing actually growing out of his back and his uniform had just gotten wadded up funny and nothing was wrong and somehow this was Dib's fault.

He jumped. There was a little light blinking at the edge of his vision. It was telling him his Pak was taking off and he had less than half an hour to live- oh- no- it was nothing of the kind, it was an urgent message from the Tallest.

Zim sat straight up and arranged his uniform and made sure there was nothing on his face and he accepted the call. If the Tallest were calling *him*, it had to be super urgent. Incredibly urgent. The faces of the Tallest filled the computer screen. Oh, he'd forgotten his Pak was plugged in there.

He saluted. "Sirs! I am at your command!"

"Where are you?" Purple asked. "Did your base blow up again?"

"That's certainly far less important than the needs of the Tallest! I am ready to receive orders."

"Why does your base keep blowing up?" Purple asked.

Zim felt one antenna twitch against his scalp. "I-"

Red was shaking his head. "Never mind about that. We have something very special for you to do, Zim."

"Yes, sir!"

"We need you to go to these co-ordinates and destroy whatever you find there."

"Ouh Okay " Zim shuddered feeling something buzz in the back of his mind as his Pak downloaded the co-ordinates. "I will not disappoint you, my Tallest. There is none so amazing at destroying as Zim!"

"Oh, we know," Purple said.

Zim might as well pull up these co-ordinates on the computer screen since he was plugged into it anyway. He started clicking around. The interface was weird.

"So," he said, just casually just making small talk. "do you remember when. " He paused, running his tongue over very dry lips. It was actually punishable by death to talk to the Tallest about a time when they were not the Tallest childhood companion or no. He'd have to phrase this carefully. "You know how smeets used to have that removal surgery?"

Purple blinked. "What? What are you talking about?"

"The vestigial... removal... procedure," Zim hedged.

"Oh right that was a thing " Red said, scratching under his chin and looking up at the ceiling.

"Did you ever have that?" Zim opened his mouth to answer but then closed it, noticing Red was looking at his co-Tallest, and not at Zim.

"Tch, no," Purple said. "We didn't have anything to remove to begin with. Because we're *better* than everyone."

Red nodded. "That's right."

"I didn't have the procedure either," Zim said.

"I thought you had all six of your-"

"I said I didn't have it," Zim said, a bit sharply.

Red blinked slowly, his face showing nothing. "You don't still have buds, do you?"

"Because if they grow in it'll probably interfere with your Pak," Purple said. "And make it fall off. And you'll die!"

"Yeah," Red said. "The new smeets don't have those anymore, do they? We finally fixed their genes, right?"

"I dunno, I don't care " Purple took a sip of his drink. Zim would have asked something to drink. There was nothing to drink in this human domicile.

"If I did have them," Zim said, "what would be my chances of survival?"

"Good, if they don't grow in." Red's eyebrows rose. "Terrible if they grow in. You'd have what a ten percent chance or so that they grow in above or around your Pak and you don't die."

"And a ninety percent chance that you die horribly because your Pak falls off!" Purple chirped.

"I hear it hurts like a stormbeast mauling you." Red mused. "That's not even the death part—that's just the growth part."

"I see. Well, it's a good thing I never had any buds," said Zim, and since living to the Tallest was also punishable by death he looked at the information that had come up on his screen and "No," he heard himself say.

"No what? No buds? Because you said that already."

"This is the white building."

Chapter Four:

Tak stuffed her hands into her pockets, narrowing her eyes against the biting wind.

This part of Earth was completely unpopulated, covered in tall grasses and low bushes and nothing else. It didn't reek the way Dirt did but it was just as lively. As in, not lively at all. As in, deserted. As in Dirt and this place were both deserted and Tak had had enough of deserted. Thank you.

She would wait here as long as necessary. She'd gone fifty-three years now without getting hers. She could handle a few hours more, even if it was cold.

As she'd never finished her Invader training she had no ocular implants and could not see in the dark. She squinted up against the inky sky until she saw the pink light appear.

She took the knife out of her pocket and held it at her side. She'd never killed another Irken before, especially not in cold blood, and she hadn't even intended to kill *him*. She'd considered it but given the situation, killing Zim seemed like—er—well, overkill. She'd wanted to show that she didn't even need him to be permanently out of the way to win.

She still thought she could win without killing him if she wanted to, but while you have permission to kill him may not have been an order, she could take a hint.

The Voot was descending. She could see it clearly now. It looked different, maybe he'd installed some upgrades.

The Voot landed a few feet away. She held the knife behind her back. A gun would have been less messy, but she hadn't been able to get hold of one. Military clearance was required to get a gun as an Irken in an Irken system. He would be tipped off immediately if she went after him.

with her Pak implements, so she'd gone with the knife. Maybe she could get up close to him with a friendly greeting and then slip the knife into him somewhere lethal, wherever was most convenient before he knew what was happening. He was so quick to believe he was wanted, he was so *stupid* that way.

There was no need to hurt him unduly. She'd done that already the last time she'd been here. He just screamed and acted like an idiot and did pretty much the same thing every time. Instead of going through all that again it was better to just minimize the duration of the act and the chances of him hurting or killing *her* as he fought back.

The Voot opened up and the driver got out and unless he'd grown an inch or so and gained thirty pounds that wasn't Zim.

Tak did not consider herself to be someone who startled easily but she almost dropped the knife. "In... Invader Skoodge?"

He was walking over to her in a crisp march and he stopped short when she said his name.

"Yeah? Hey, how do you know that?"

"What? You were on the news," she said. She'd had nothing to occupy herself with on Dirt but a broken TV that only picked up news broadcasts and the Vortian sports gauntlet, which was really boring. "What are you doing here?"

"The Tallest called me!"

Tak was still holding the knife.

She had no intention whatsoever of killing Skoodge. She slipped the knife back into its sheath in her pocket. "I was expecting... someone else," she said.

He grimaced slightly. "The 'other' Skoodge?"

"No! Zim."

"Oh!" His antennae perked up. "Yeah? I don't know why they didn't call him. I didn't think the Tallest even knew I was living here."

"You live here?" Earth was busy and populated, but it was completely cut off from any civilized part of the universe. She wouldn't have chosen it. Especially since Zim was still on it. After three years. Three! A decent Invasion timeline was two months at most!

"Yeah. I used to live in Zim's base." He'd *what?* -but after a while, I wanted to branch out, so I moved to this other continent, it's pretty cool."

"Oh," she said. "Well... all right... I suppose..."

He shrugged. "Yeah, I never was reassigned, so..."

"So..."

"Hi."

Er. "Hello..."

Tak shifted her weight back and forth. She had not planned for this. She had never thought she would meet Skroodge, an Invader whose career she'd followed rather closely. Like everyone else, she assumed, she'd expected him to fail and be horribly killed. When he'd succeeded instead, she did not understand why that success hadn't qualified him for more work, but she supposed it wasn't her place to worry about that.

"Why didn't you conquer Earth? How long have you been here?"

Skroodge shrugged again, looking down. "Well, it's not my assignment. I didn't want to get in Zim's way."

"Why... why not?"

Skroodge could only shrug a third time. "So... you know, it's kinda cold out here." Is there somewhere to go inside and talk?"

"Yes..." She shook herself. Yes, it was extremely cold. "Yes, I have a headquarters set up just over there in the trees, so..."

"So..."

"Yes..."

"Yeah..."

He grinned at her.

She had *not* expected this.

Dang it Dib had fallen asleep dang it *dang it*

He sat up, rubbing his eyes. Zim was clattering around in the dark somewhere, muttering "What are you doing?" Dib tried to demand, but he was still mostly asleep and it came out like "Whardoe?"

Zim didn't answer. "I'll have to call them back..." he was muttering. "Have to! No! No!"

There was another clattering noise. Dib was much more awake now. "Zim!" he cried. Zim yelped.

"What are you doing?" Dib asked.

"I- Dib!" He sounded startled, as if he'd forgotten Dib was there. "I-"

Dib's glasses had somehow remained in place while he was napping. He adjusted them a little and then got up, groping along the wall for the lightswitch.

"Outside." Zim mumbled and Dib was pretty sure what followed was the sound of him going up the stairs.

Dib turned the lights on and went up the stairs after Zim, squinting against the sudden bright light.

Gaz was still playing video games in the living room. Zim went right through the kitchen to the sliding glass doors and out on to the porch, as if he knew where the door was. Had he cased the joint while Dib was asleep?

Dib noted that the clock on the wall read 3:03 as he followed Zim outside.

Zim was heading down to the lake. He went right to the shore and headed down along the edge of the water. He was holding a pool cue and waving it aimlessly around. He was moving in a disjointed, floppy fashion, as if he was injured or off-balance.

"I should have known," Zim was saying. "It was too easy. Too easy!" He was so close to the water. He was right up against the edge. Zim wasn't too fond of water. This was a little strange.

"Get a grip," Dib said, expecting to be ignored.

He wasn't disappointed. "It never ends, none of it. None of it! What have I done?"

Zim slowed to a stop. His green skin was silver under the moonlight and his red/purple/whatever eyes were glittering coal black.

Dib stopped where he was as well. He'd forgotten, somehow, maybe because there had never been any real incidents, but there'd always been something a little funny about this lake.

"You hear that?" he asked. Gaz had always claimed not to hear the lake.

no one believes you and they never will

"I..." Zim rubbed his eyes as if he was just waking up.

no one has ever seen the things you see

"Hear... hear what?"

do you really think he's real, that ridiculous pink and green... thing

"I don't... hear anything," Zim muttered.

you're insane. Dib, accept it and go away

"I don't hear anything." Zim repeated, holding his head in one hand, keeping a death grip on the pool cue with the other.

"Sure you don't." Dib went a little closer to him. "There's some kind of weird energy in the lake. I've never seen what's in there, but I'm guessing someone drowned and imprinted, you know."

standard haunting. It's pretty mean and it always says to leave but at the same time, it sort of pulls you."

Zim took a faltering step closer to the water.

"Don't do that," Dib said. "I'll absorb you and use your life essence to become stronger and more evil."

Zim shook his head. He turned and started trudging down the shoreline, farther away from the house. Dib kept pace with him.

"So how long were you loose in the basement?" Dib asked. "Did you do anything to it?"

"What? No. Be quiet."

"You stole our pool cue."

"Oh yeah," Zim mumbled. The pool cue looked scratched and battered. Dib had no idea what shape it had been in before and didn't know whether or not to accuse Zim of wrecking it. The wind whipped at Dib's hair, howling over the lake, which was covered in sharp little waves that glinted in the moonlight like blades. The moon was bright, but it wasn't full. Not yet. Not quite.

"Hoo," Dib muttered, hugging himself to try and hang on to a little body heat.

Zim was rubbing his temples. Dib did not particularly want to go through the whole rigamarole of asking Zim what his deal was only to have Zim insist there was no deal and then Dib would say there *was* a deal and Zim would scream about being better than everyone and really Zim was obviously not a threat right now, so maybe Dib would just go inside and back to sleep and

"I refused a direct order from the Tallest!"

Or Zim could start talking. Judging from his body language and where he was looking, he was actually addressing the pool cue, not Dib. Okay, whatever.

"You what?" Dib said.

"The Tallest! I am an Invader. How can I..."

"What kind of order?"

"I have to call them back and tell them I was joking. Yes." Zim hugged the pool cue. His eyes were wild and unseeing and his antennae were flapping around in the wind. Dib wondered if that was painful. "I actually *was* joking, you know, I wouldn't really..."

"What are you plan-"

"I'M NOT PLANNING ANYTHING!" Zim whipped around and hit Dib in the gut with the pool cue. Dib fell to his knees.

"Man! I was just," he wheezed, "asking if-"

"STOP IT! STOP! STOP!" Zim dropped the pool cue and clutched his head with both hands. "I CANT TAKE IT ANYMORE! SHUT UP! SHUT UP, SHUT UP!"

Dib was quiet.

Zim hugged himself and rocked back and forth, gasping. He looked like a wounded animal. Zim in this state of mind could be dangerous. Dib slowly reached for the dropped pool cue. Zim snatched it up and clocked Dib on the head with it. Ow. Zim started pacing back and forth, holding the pool cue like it was a parade rifle. His movements were jerky and fast. "You don't understand. You can't. You're a human. You're a smeeety human! You're twelve!"

Dib rubbed his forehead. He was going to have a bruise, he guessed. "I'm fifteen."

"You are a mere smeeetling of TWELVE!"

"I'M FIFTEEN YEARS OLD AND I SHAVE!"

"I DON'T CARE!" Zim hit the ground with his pool cue. "YOU!" He hit the ground again, swinging the pool cue like a golf club and kicking up a plume of sand. "ARE! DIRT! AL GH! there's sand in my eye!" He sat down with his back to Dib, rubbing his eyes.

The warm house beckoned Dib, and Zim was so not a threat right now. Maybe if Dib hung around for his tantrum Zim would divulge some kind of information about his species, but probably not. Maybe he should just-

Zim turned around. "They're back."

"Who's back?"

"The white building."

Dib blinked. "General Labs?"

Zim popped to his feet. "DONT CONTRADICT ME!"

Dib held his hands up.

"How can they be back?" Zim demanded. "I saw their leader dead! I cut his head off myself!"

"I... I don't know... you did *what*?"

"Why is this happening?" Zim grabbed double handfuls of Dib's shirt and started to shake him back and forth. "Why do these things happen to Zim?"

Zim whimpered some more, then "Okay."

Dib started heading for the house. Zim followed after him, sniffing.

Gaz had turned off the TV and was asleep on the couch, curled up into a little ball with her hair tossed all around her face. GIR was sitting on the floor, picking at something. Dib went closer to look at what was going on. There was a line of ants coming into the house through a tiny crack in the wall. GIR was stamping them out with his thumb one by one as they entered.

Well, hm.

Dib saw no need to get involved in that.

Zim headed down the hall, still sniffing. Dib followed him. He went into Dad's bedroom- again, he walked straight into the room as if he knew where it was ahead of time.

"You *did* ease the joint," Dib muttered. His face and hands felt hot and prickly now, adjusting to being out of the wind. He reached up to feel his sore ears. They were like ice. He refused to believe Zim hadn't been freezing his antennae off, too.

Zim made a whining noise and crawled under the bed. Dib blinked.

Zim re-emerged from under the bed, coughing. "Do you humans never CLEAN?"

"Get out of here." Mindful of how Gaz really, really didn't like to be woken up, Dib tried to whisper while still conveying his righteous anger. "This is my Dad's room!"

"So?" Zim pouted like a two-year-old. "He won't mind. *He* doesn't *hate* me." Zim withdrew back under the bed, started coughing again and came back out with gray smears of dust on his berry-bright uniform.

"Zim, get away from there. You know you're asthmatic!"

"I'm what?" Zim bared his teeth. He must have thought "asthmatic" was some kind of insult.

"I thought you were here to *learn* about Earth!" Dib told him (forgetting to whisper). "What do you even *do* when I'm not chasing you, huh? Huh? Sit around and play video games?"

Zim's eyes narrowed.

"Asthmatic means you have alien cooties that will contaminate the area under my dad's bed. Get out of there," Dib said finally.

Zim huffed and dusted off his uniform. He was wheezing slightly. He had always had noticeable allergies to dust that seemed worse lately, maybe because of his brush with the flu a few months ago. "Fine."

Dib wasn't even allowed in here- not that Dad was around to be angry, but still. Dib left the room and Zim followed.

Dib headed downstairs. It was best to keep a good distance from Gaz when she was sleeping. Dib sat down on the futon and Zim crawled under the game table, lying down on his belly and folding his hands under his chin.

Dib folded his hands over his knee, feeling like he'd gone right back to where he'd started last night. Zim was even taking his book out again. Dib caught a look at the title this time. Zim was reading *War of the Worlds*. Oh, the irony.

Dib cleared his throat. "So... here's our current situation."

Zim raised an eyebrow when Dib said "our" but didn't look up. Dib wondered if Zim knew he was fully visible under the table.

"My bedroom and living room are totaled but the rest of my house is probably still there, and the stuff in it is probably accessible, though the house might be unstable and dangerous." Maybe Dib should have grabbed a few things before taking off. Oh well. Too late now. "Your base is completely flattened, along with everything that was on the house level."

"Yes. I know."

"I can't get in touch with my Dad, there are werewolves after me and you say General Labs is back."

"Minhmm." Zim turned a page.

"How long have you known about this?"

"I was just informed."

"Okay. And you say something's wrong with you?"

"With me?" Zim scratched under his chin. "No, I'm fine."

"You said you felt horrible."

"When?"

"A few minutes ago!"

"I feel fine."

Dib rolled his eyes. "Okay. Now, what are we going to do about General Labs?"

Zim blinked slowly, without expression. "Do?"

"Yes! We have to do something! They're totally evil! And- wait, didn't their building blow up?"

"Yes, they have a new one. In the wilderness! Hold on." Zim put a fist to his mouth and started coughing wetly. Dib recoiled.

Zim spat out a piece of paper. "Behold! Their co-ordinates!"

"Ew!"

"What?"

"EWWW!"

"Whaaat?" Zim looked offended.

"That's... just... really gross. Don't do it again!"

Zim snorted at him. "Your jealousy is pathetic, Dib worm."

"How did you even *do* that? Did you swallow that? Are you like... half *printer*?"

"Ha! You can only DREAM of this knowledge!"

Dib shook his head.

"I have powers," Zim told him.

"Uh, like what?"

Zim tilted his head, narrowing one eye and looking generally deranged. "I have developed the amazing ability to predict RAIN. With only my shoulder! Does that not threaten the cohesion of your primitive earthly mind?"

"Is it the shoulder you got shot in?"

Zim frowned. "Yes. Why?"

"Does it hurt when it's going to rain?" Zim got all quiet. "Because that's kinda typical, really."

"SILENCE! I didn't ask you if it was typical, I told you to be amazed!"

"Whatever, Zim, we need to do something about General Labs. Stop changing the subject."

Zim looked away, stony-faced, one antenna twitching. "Isn't it obvious that we need to destroy it?"

Dib raised his eyebrows. "Wow, Zim, I'm really shocked."

Zim's voice was low and flat. "Destroy it. From the outside. Flatten the building with aid of the evil humans still inside, so that they all die until they are quite dead and cannot return. Expunge them from the face of the planet Earth before they are aware of our presence."

"Killing a bunch of humans, huh?" And until they're dead to boot. "Yeah. Convenient, Zim."

Zim ground his zipper-teeth together. "You've seen them? You've seen what they've done? You *read* the files. Dib, does your little primordial lizard brain not grasp what they *did*? Don't you want to make them pay? I thought you wanted to protect your fellow humans." His eyes got wild. "Or maybe you are *truly* driven by your hatred and jealousy of ZIM!"

Dib decided that to acknowledge that last one—even to contest it, would only feed the bloated ego. "There are probably innocent people in there. They were bringing in test subjects and letting them wander around to observe them before doing anything. Innocent, unmutated people! We can't just kill off a bunch of—" Zim had gotten really pale. Dib sighed. "What? What now?"

"I... huh? Nuh... nothing." Zim put a hand to his head, staring into space with bulging eyes as if he'd seen something too horrible to comprehend. It was the same look Dib had seen on a lot of haunting victims. "Nothing."

"There is so something you had better not be sick! I can't stand you when you're sick! Stop it! Just stop!" He wasn't sure what exactly he was telling Zim to stop doing. Zim wasn't really doing anything.

He was nibbling on his lower lip a little. He sat up straight and threw his shoulders back. "You do know what they're trying to do, Dib. You're not that dense, are you?"

"Making some kind of gross zombie soldier. But it's totally not working."

"It wasn't working three months ago, Dib."

Dib considered this. "Are you worried that their project's succeeded since then?"

"No. No, they're just humans. No." But his face said 'yes.'

"Most of those three months were probably spent changing leadership and locations. I doubt they had time to get anything accomplished."

"They coulda had two buildings the whole time! And a second Tallest!" Zim was gestating wildly and looking around the room with eyes that seemed to focus on something that was in, y there in his mind. "What if..."

Zim using vernacular like *coulda* and accidentally referring to humans by Irken terms was Zim on his last frayed nerve and potentially dangerous. "What if you calm down?"

Zim laid his antennae back and huffed.

Dib sighed and looked up at the ceiling. "Is there any chance of you letting me deal with this?"

"Of course. Because you handled yourself so brilliantly the last time, Dib. I was amazed."

Dib added nasty sarcasm to his long mental list of weird things Zim did when he was upset. "Oh right. You did way better. When you were throwing up on my shoes and getting shot at."

"You little-" Zim jumped to his feet and hit his head on the underside of the table. "DOH! OW!"

Dib snickered. Zim was trembling. He came out from under the table and walked up to Dib, glaring into his face. With Dib seated and Zim standing they were almost the same height.

"Fine." Zim clutched his hands together in a knot. "I'll allow you to go in ahead and try to free your precious, unmutated test subjects. I'll give you... say... three days before I destroy the building."

"Hm. Okay." Dib drummed his fingers on the couch cushion. "And if I don't come out?" He had a pretty good idea what would happen if he didn't come out, actually.

"Then you never come out."

"Because you'll blow me up, I take it."

"Yes."

"Fine." Dib held his hand out for a handshake. Zim just looked at it. Dib put his hand back down. He didn't know why he'd done that. Reflex or something. "It's a bet."

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A/N: I haven't even thanked my proofreaders, Implode and Donnistar. That's horrifically rude of me. They have now been thanked.

Chapter Five

Tak picked up her collapsible pointer, pressed the sections together into a neat little pen-shaped rod, and put the pointer back into her Pak. Skoodge leaned forward in his chair, studying the sheet with her notes on it. She hadn't expected to be showing those notes to anyone. They were messier than she would have liked. She thought she was even missing a comma or two.

"It sounds like you have everything covered," he said.

"Yes, well... yes, I do," she said. In fact, she couldn't think of a single thing she needed Skoodge for. She ached to just tell him to stand in the corner and not touch anything, but really, she didn't need to be rude to him. It wasn't his fault the Tallest hated him and kept sending him on suicide missions, including one that was very much in Tak's way.

Was Tak going to get in trouble if Skoodge survived the mission? She really didn't want to kill him.

"But everyone could use back-up," he said.

"I suppose," said Tak, who had never had back up, ever. Invading was a solo project. Even if you were officially on payroll, which Tak wasn't.

He was still studying her notes. "What if they don't hire you?"

"I will make them hire me. I have methods." She hunched her shoulders. "If they don't I'll go in as a test subject." There were obvious reasons why being a test subject would be less desirable.

"Okay. What if they find out you're Irken?" You said they found out about Zam."

Tak snorted. "Because he's incompetent!"

"But what would you do if they found you out?" It's always helpful to plan for contingencies! Even if they're unexpected!"

"I'll..." Tak's mouth went dry. She actually hadn't planned for being found out. Like she hadn't planned for Zam running to his little human friends three years ago.

"Maybe if you're discovered you'll call me and I can come get you!"

"Yes, that was the plan," Tak snapped.

Skroodge didn't seem to notice her short tone. "Okay!" He took out a pen and wrote 'CALL SKROODGE IF CALLED' on Tak's plan. Her claws dug into the top of the table. He was writing on her notes..

"There?" he said.

He'd written on her notes.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Oh, yes!" she chirped, fiddling with her gloves so she wouldn't succumb to the irrational urge to take away Skroodge's writing implement so he couldn't do that again. "Just fine!"

"Okay. When did you want to get started?"

"I've already gotten started." She took a deep breath and let it out. "They're interviewing me for a scientist position in a matter of hours."

It was 6 AM and the human had only just now gotten back to sleep.

Zam closed his book and put it back in his Pak. He had spent the last hour or so mostly just reading the same sentence over and over as his squeedly-spooch twisted and untwisted and re-twisted and his palms sweated onto the insides of his gloves.

He went to the computer in the back of the room and hooked himself up to it. He sent a signal out to the Tallest.

They appeared on his screen.

Zim had rehearsed a little speech in his head- it had been a very good one, he thought, getting his point across clearly, succinctly and humbly, but now all he could say was "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." The Tallest just looked at each other. Zim cleared his throat. He felt as if he was choking. "I mean, what I mean is, I accidentally disconnected earlier."

"That's good," said Tallest Red, "because it sure seemed like you said 'no' to us."

"More than once," Purple added.

"-and then you hung up on us."

"Me? No, sirs!" Zim tried to bow. The best thing would have been to lie face-down before them, but he was sitting and could only awkwardly double over. "I was forced to use some faulty human technology to communicate. It cut out. I was just about to accept the mission and make it my highest priority." Zim suddenly didn't know what to do with his hands. They kept clasping each other, fiddling with his antennae, adjusting his gloves.

"Okay, good. We'd hate for anything to have to happen to you," Purple said. It was, of course, a capital offense to refuse a direct order from the Tallest. Zim had gotten away with not following orders before, but he'd never actually said no to their faces. He saluted, putting on his most loyal expression.

"Well, we have to go talk to some Invaders who aren't going to say no to us and commit treason, Zim," Purple said. "Bye!"

They hung up.

Zim drew his knees into his chest and folded his arms on top of them, scrunching up into a tiny balled-up heap. The basement was a little chilly and his own body heat felt nice.

He could hear Dib snoring. Dib didn't know how easy his pathetic little life was. If Dib felt stressed and overworked and not entirely well, he could just run off and do human vacation things. Or sleep. Invaders were tireless and did not take breaks and certainly did not take naps. There was to be no more delaying. He needed to be in top condition for this new mission and he needed those corrupted memory files out of his Pak now.

Zim had really known where to look for his memories of the white building the whole time. His Pak was an extension of himself. He knew what went where. He spent the next half hour deleting things, averting his eyes from the screen and trying to keep his mind blank.

Wait, here was something he should probably examine.

Zim had spent three days in the white building that his meat brains didn't remember. Somehow it had never occurred to him to look in the Pak files to find out what had happened. Well, he'd been busy at the time. Extremely busy. Extremely busy with *not dying*.

He had to know. He started the playback.

Zim knew he should leave and get back to work, but he couldn't seem to work up the will to move. He was lying on a flat and not altogether comfortable bed in a room that was completely empty except for a small bedside table with two syringes on it, one empty, one containing a little bit of blue liquid. There was an open doorway leading out to the hall.

There was a human here. An adult male with brown hair. He was pacing in and out of the doorway.

Zim was not restrained in any way. He just didn't feel like he could... move.

There was a small device stuck to his Pak. He wondered if removing it would give him more energy, but he could not work up the will to try that out.

The brown-haired human had told him that the Tallest had said this was necessary for him to be here. How could a human be in contact with the Tallest? How could the human know about the Tallest at all? Zim would have to carry out a full interrogation. Later. When he could move better.

Zim was wearing the overalls he'd had on for a science experiment, and the goggles. His hands were sore because the hyman he'd been working with had manied him a bit. He wriggled into a less uncomfortable position and licked at one of the most painful cuts. Doing that took up all of his energy.

There was another human in the doorway, a blonde woman in a white coat. She was whispering to the man, wide-eyed. The man nodded and pointed in Zim's direction.

The woman came closer. "Wow. A real alien."

She stood over Zim, studying him all over, like how Dib did, but without the malice. "Wow. All green and everything."

"Yep," the man said. "It's a little skatish, now. Be careful. Don't be too loud, don't make sudden movements."

Zim wanted to scoff.

The woman was still looking him over. "It's kinda cute, in a homely way." The woman's hair looked very soft. For a brief moment of insanity, Zim wanted to touch it to see if it was as soft as it looked. Even if that craziness hadn't passed, he doubted he was able to raise his hand that far.

"Okay," the woman said, picking up Zim's arm and rolling up the sleeve to above the elbow. She picked up the empty syringe.

"What are you doing?" Zim managed to ask. He sounded muzzy, as if he'd been sleeping. Ew.

The woman froze.

The man stepped forward. "She's just taking a little blood sample. The Tallest okayed everything."

"It speaks English," the woman said.

"It does, Gloria. It's a fascinating creature. We're excited to have that blood sample to learn more," the man said.

The woman, Gloria, apparently, nodded and drew a little blood from Zim's arm. It hurt a bit. Not too badly.

He wanted to ask why the Tallest were allowing the human race to study the Irken one, as they were in fact enemies, but a sentence that complex was just too hard.

Gloria picked up the other syringe. "This... this might be a little uncomfortable for you," she said haltingly.

"Mnhmm." He was an invader; discomfort meant nothing.

She injected the liquid and it made Zim feel cold all over. He whimpered. "I'm sorry," she muttered.

Present day: Zim ripped himself back to his senses enough to put the memory in fast forward (which felt extremely unpleasant). He shuddered as ghosts of the chilling and then cramping effects of whatever that blue stuff was tore through his body.

Never did the past version of himself ask what it was.

Zim watched himself be X-rayed and MRI'd and examined and at one point he couldn't watch anymore and he deleted the whole file and went back under Dib's game table.

When Dib woke up again it was light out.

He yawned and stretched and checked the location of the alien. Zim was under the table, sitting there cross-legged, head hanging, not moving.

Dib went upstairs. Gaz had gotten up and gone to bed at some point and was asleep now. GIR was watching some annoying, ugly, loud cartoon on TV.

Dib looked around in the kitchen for any sort of supplies. He found three chipped plastic spoons, a box of Twinkies from 2005, some coffee from 2003, and a rusty coffee maker. It was 7 AM.

Dib scraped off as much of the rust as possible and started up the coffee maker. He needed to be as awake as possible. He needed to plan.

He heard movement on the other end of the room and looked up to see Zim sitting down at the little card table that was set up there. He looked tired and pale.

"What is that reeking substance?" he asked.

"This? It's coffee. It helps you wake up."

Zim rubbed the back of his neck, grimacing. "You cannot pull yourself from the disgusting state of sleep without a certain substance?"

"Why do I even talk to you?"

Zim hesitated.

"That wasn't a real question," Dib told him. "It was rhetorical. You aren't supposed to answer."

"I knew that."

The coffee maker was done. Dib realized he had no mugs or cups of any kind to pour the brewed coffee into. He'd have to drink it directly from the jar once it cooled, and drink it black, too. Fantastic.

Dib sat down across from Zim at the table, leaving the coffee to cool. "Let's talk strategy."

Zim shrugged. His movements were sluggish. "What strategy? I'm going to go back into the underground portions of my base to get some explosives. Then I'm going to take the Voot to the building, destroy it and go home to rebuild. You're going to run around inside the building on a looting errand that I expressly told you not to attempt. I don't care how you do that."

"What Voot?" Also, Zim had referred to his base as "home" again. "Your Voot blew up. It's gone."

"Oh," Zim said. He looked down at the top of the table. "Yes."

Dib laced his fingers together. "Let me make some things clear, Zim. You're three hours from your base, by car. Your underground base might not be accessible even if you could get there. The above-ground part is totally gone. You have no disguise. You're kinda trapped. Unless you wanna go out there and wander around in the woods a little."

Zim wouldn't make eye contact.

Dib leaned in. "So here's the thing. If you're a good little space monster and you play nice, I'll let you keep parking your sorry green hide in my turf. If you keep being unco-operative, the Swollen Eyeballs are a phone call away and you have nowhere to go, my friend."

Zim kept his eyes down.

"Do you understand me, Zim?"

"Yes," he said, in a flat tone. "I understand."

"Okay." Dib checked the coffee. It was already lukewarm. He tried to drink it. It was absolutely nasty.

Zim's hands were all balled up together and his jaw was clenched. Maybe Dib shouldn't have antagonized him quite so much, what with the recent nervous breakdowns and screaming nightmares and all. There was 'keeping the alien in check' and then there was 'playing chicken with his homicidal urges'. Dib wasn't in a great position right now either. "Do you want to try the coffee?" he said, to lighten the mood.

"No."

Zim looked really tired. "You might be able to eat the grounds. They'd taste bad, but--"

Zim stood up, slamming his hands down on the table. "I DON'T WANT ANY COFFEE."

"Okay. Fine." Dib choked down some more of the bitter brew. He wondered if the Twinkies were worth the risk. He was starving.

Zim was breathing heavily. He looked twitchy.

Dib decided to try a Twinkie. He took one out. It was rock hard. "I'm going to need to get in there without them knowing I'm there. Any ideas?"

"No," Zim muttered.

"I need my stealth suit. We're going to have to go back." Another three hours with a carsickness-prone alien. And GIR. Yippee.

"Mmmmh." Zim rocked back and forth. His eyes were glazed over.

Dib unwrapped the Twinkie and started trying to eat it. His teeth could barely make a dent in it.

"I guess these things don't last forever after all."

Zim put his head in his hands, sighing.

Dib studied the Twinkie. It was obviously stale, but did that mean it would make him sick or did it just mean an unpleasant eating experience?

"Dib?"

He turned to see Gaz standing in the doorway. She was wearing pajamas that he remembered being very baggy three years ago- they fit snugly now.

He and Dad had laughed at her in her mountain of felt. She hadn't liked that. That had been a while ago.

"Yeah?" he said. He was suddenly very aware of this rotten green space monster sitting in a space that was full of family memories. Now when Dib came to the vacation house he would also remember Zim sitting there at the card table looking crabby.

"It's Sunday morning." She opened one very intense eye. "We need our pancakes."

"Yeah, we don't have any food," said Dib. He'd been planning to leave for General Labs soon but now wasn't the right time for that, he realized. He didn't even know where its new location was. He had the option of trying to look at the piece of paper Zim had spat up and decipher whatever Irkens used to describe locations, but ew. No.

And Gaz. Gaz shouldn't be anywhere near that place. If she ever knew what was in that building—and what she'd done the first time—not that she'd meant to do it—not that Dib would ever let her find out.

Gaz was standing there, waiting.

"I guess I'll go get some supplies," Dib said. He wondered if he could reasonably leave Gaz alone here in the middle of nowhere while he and Zim went off on a death mission. No, not really. He'd have to try to get in touch with Dad again. But wait! Dib couldn't leave Gaz alone with Zim while he went for supplies. He couldn't leave Zim unattended in the house at all. At the very least he'd steal more pool cues and junk.

"Come on," he said to Zim. "You're coming with me! Under my direct supervision!"

"No," Zim said.

"Yes!"

"No I don't want to."

Dib looked over at Gaz.

"What? You think I will harm your precious baby sister, Dib?" Zim mocked. He dug his knuckles into the corner of his eye. Dib wondered why he seemed so tired. Irkens didn't usually sleep. "I once thought you were observant."

"I don't have any idea what you're talking about," Dib said.

"Little Gaz." Zim inclined his head in her direction. "She's more of a monster than I am. Th- that- than you think I am."

Gaz shrugged.

Dib's eyes narrowed and he adjusted his glasses. He did not appreciate these allegations being made towards his sister.

"Go," Gaz said. "Get the food."

"But..."

"What would I possibly even want with her?" Zim seemed annoyed now.

Gaz had never had a problem with Zim before and Dib was starving and getting food seemed like a good priority. "Fine." Dib went to the door. "If you do anything to her, Zim, if you hurt one hair on her head, I will crush you like the worthless bug you are."

"Whatever."

Dib left the house.

Dib was gone and he might not stay gone for long. Time for swift and precise business dealings.

"Okay so," Zim said, before Gaz could walk away, "do you remember when you killed the leader of the white building?"

"Are you talking to me?"

"Yes." There was no one else in the room.

"No," Gaz said.

"The large white building with the disappearing doors. You destroyed the leader, and then stole the files," Zim said, wondering why the blasted pig never showed any signs of *feeling* when these important things were discussed. Humans were all about feeling. They didn't acknowledge their unpleasant, unwanted emotions and move on like Zim did and like Zim was pretty sure Irkens were supposed to do, they purposefully invoked feelings out of a twisted sense of fun. Zim hated feelings. Humans were stupid and suicidal.

"I didn't kill anyone," Gaz was saying, still without feeling.

"Yes you did. You broke his neck."

Gaz opened one eye. "When?"

Had she really done it by accident, then? Zim shrugged. "Never mind. The operation's returned and we have to once again destroy it. I do not trust the Dib to destroy it properly."

"Why would I help you?"

"Why would you, Gaz?" Zim stood up in his chair. "What in the entirety of the vast, glorious Irken Empire of GLORY and POWER could you possibly WANT?"

"You to shut up."

Rade. "I can give you things your foul little human mind can't comprehend. You like video games, correct?"

She grunted.

Zim leaned forward. "I can give you video games. I can give you video games like you have never gamed. Before." He didn't think that had turned out right.

Gaz's eyebrows rose. "Like you've never gamed?"

"Do you want this amazing offer or not?" Zim spat. He had a pounding headache.

"No." She started to turn away.

"Gaz!" Zim jumped up onto the table. "I can give you anything. Gaz. Anything!"

"No you can't."

"I can so! Look at me when I'm speaking to you! Gaz! Gaz!"

Gaz turned. "What's your problem?"

"This is serious, Gaz. I will do—" His mouth was suddenly dry. "Anything."

Gaz seemed to be considering this. "Anything, huh?"

Every nerve in Zim's body was screaming *no*.

"Anything," he said before he could chicken out. The mission was the important thing. He could handle some weird obligation to Gaz. He'd probably just pretend to have forgotten all about this. She held his gaze for a minute.

"No," she said. She walked away.

Dib had left his coffee pot sitting on the table. Zim kicked it over. Then he picked up one of the discarded Twinkies and considered it. It looked nasty but his Pak was signaling to him that it would work more efficiently if he had something to eat. His body was sending him the same signal. It wasn't particularly pleasant.

Gnawing hunger did prove to be less unpleasant than the taste of this oblong yellow rock thing. Zim threw it hard against the wall instead and felt a little better when it made a sizable dent.

The sky was slate gray and felt low and heavy. Tak could smell approaching rain in the air. She could almost taste it.

Zim's notes and the schematics he'd collected had described a fifty-story building all in white that was unlocked— you could walk right in.

This new base was ten stories, gray and ringed with barbed wire fencing. There was a bright red sign on the padlocked gate that said:

AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY

There were more signs all along the fence.

KEEP OUT

ELECTRIC FENCE

DO NOT ENTER

TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED

TRESPASSERS WILL BE SHOT

BY ORDER OF PRESIDENT MAN

Tak's favorite

THERE IS NO INFECTION HERE

(Her holographic disguise hid a tight gas mask as well as her true species. Just in case.)

A woman in a long white coat was exiting the triple-locked and quadruple-bolted front door. She came to the gate and opened it. Tak walked right through.

The woman in the white coat ushered her into General Labs. The door closed behind her and locked several times.

Tak had spent several months in space in a very small escape pod. Knowing she might not be able to leave the building made her chest feel tight. She took a deep breath and willed herself to focus.

"Right through here," the woman muttered, ushering Tak down a long hallway. Zam had described high technology in the original base and that had been borne out in the files he'd sent. This was a shabby warehouse-looking place with bad lighting and bare concrete walls and there were more signs.

THERE IS NO INFECTION HERE

was proving to be a recurring theme.

The doors were clearly not hidden and they too had signs.

DO NOT ENTER. AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.

The woman opened a door and Tak went through. She sat down across from a large wooden desk.

The woman vanished. There was a large, beefy man on the other side of the desk.

"Tacqueline Ragno," he boomed. "You come with an impressive list of credentials. I must say." She inclined her head, intending a show of modest thanks. She knew her credentials were impressive. She had fabricated most of them. "That's an interesting last name you have, where's your family from?"

Tak clasped her hands together. "It's Italian." It meant spider. She was quite proud of that one.

"Ah. Is your family from there?"

"Why yes! Unfortunately, my immediate family was killed in a tragic hunting accident some time ago and I rarely see the others." She attempted a laugh to appear more casual. It came out as somewhat of a nervous titter. yuck. "I'm trying to get a new start here in America."

The man looked pleased. She'd guessed correctly—he really just wanted to know if anyone would miss her if something unfortunate happened. "I'm so sorry to hear that. Maybe General Labs can become your new start."

"Maybe so," she said.

Something was bothering Dib, sitting in the back of his mind where he couldn't get at it. He let his focus stay on the road, maybe the something would reveal itself.

Something—something to do with Dad. He'd been just thinking of how he needed to call Dad, get his attention and explain the business with the house. This was different. Something else. Something about...

I've just found out about a betrayal of my science!

Hadn't Dad said something like that?

And—and—hadn't the leader of the first General Labs been a *disgruntled ex-employee of Dad's*?

Dib whipped out his cell phone. No service.

"NO SERVICE?" he cried.

This was important. This could be life or death important! He'd have to ask if the general store he was going to would let him use a phone.

The store was a rickety little shack in the middle of nowhere. Dib walked up to the front door and saw they were closed on Sundays.

He looked through the window—the place was empty.

Okay, so if the fate of the world was potentially at stake- was it morally okay to break into a convenience store? He knew ways to get in that wouldn't leave much damage. He could leave money.

He knocked on the door and called out a few times- no one answered. There were no vehicles in the lot.

The next closest store was forty minutes away. (On closer reflection, it seemed downright impossible that Gaz had ordered pizza last night because there was no pizza place within an hour's drive. He'd have to ask her about that.) But still, it probably wasn't okay to. Dib's stomach growled.

He picked the lock and went inside.

Dib picked out some supplies, enough for a few days, and put them in the trunk of the car. He left enough money for the groceries, the damage to the lock, and a generous tip on the counter, and he picked up the phone. It was dead. Great.

Dib headed off back to the vacation house. As soon he walked in with the groceries he ran into Zam, who started clawing at Dib's armful of food things, muttering something about a consuming hunger.

"What are you doing?" Dib demanded. He aimed a kick at the little Irken but not before Zam got away with a loaf of Wonder bread.

Now GIR was hugging Dib's knees. "Did you get breakfast?" he chirped.

"Yes, for me and Gaz! Not for you!"

GIR started to sob. "Breakfast! BREAKFAST!"

Dib dropped a can of soup on GIR's head. "There! Beat it!"

GIR picked up the can. "YES YES YES!" He ran out of the room.

Dib dumped the rest of the supplies on the card table. Gaz walked in, picked up the box of pancake mix, Dib had gotten, and walked into the kitchen, not saying a word.

Dib then noticed the puddle of spilled coffee and the small, pointed boot print on the overturned coffee maker. "Damn him," he said, hands balling into fists. "Damn him to heck."

Gaz said something in the kitchen. He couldn't quite make it out because it coincided with her clanging a pot around. It had sounded oddly like "Need help with that?"

"What?" he asked.

"Never mind, Dib!"

"Oh, okay, whatever." He hadn't gotten any napkins or anything. He'd just let this spilled coffee dry.

It had eaten through part of the table. Ick.
Dib took out his cell phone. One bar.

He dialed Dad and got voicemail. "Hey Dad," he said, "I was just wondering if you meant a company called General Labs when you said someone was betraying your science. Also, our house blew up. Bye." He put the phone in his pocket and started putting away the groceries.

His phone was ringing. He answered it.

"Did you say GENERAL LABS?" It was Dad and he sounded mad.

"Um, yeah."

"How do you know THAT NAME?"

"They, uh, they gave me a flier once..."

"You are NOT to visit them, son! If you go to the address on that flier, you are GROUNDED! I'm coming home right now!"

He hung up.

"Huh," Dib said. He continued putting the groceries away.

The phone rang again. Dib answered.
It was Dad again. "The house is in RUINS!"

"Uh yeah," Dib said. "It blew up. We're at the vacation house."
Dad hung up.

Dib put away the last of the groceries.

Gaz set two paper bowls filled with pancakes on the table. Dib realized he'd forgotten to get plates.

He sat down at the table and started eating his pancakes.

There was a knock on the door.

Dib answered it. It was Dad. A Membrane Labs helicopter was sitting in the yard next to the car, the rotors still slowing to a stop.

"Hi, Dad," Dib said.

"Son! I'm having the house repaired as we speak! You and Gaz are going to stay safe inside until this current situation is over!"

"Wait, right now?" Dib said.

"I made pancakes," Gaz said.

"That's nice daughter. Yes, right NOW!" Dad threw his hands into the air.

"But-" Where were Zim and GIR? Dib couldn't just leave them here to destroy the house. "Can I get something first?"

Dad looked at his watch. "Hmm- go ahead, son, the repairs will take another hour anyway, but be QUICK about it!"

Dib ran into Dad's bedroom, remembering that Zim had tried to hide in there before. GIR was sitting on the bed in the center of a crater of soup. Soup was on the walls and ceiling and floor. GIR looked very pleased.

Dib stared in silence for a moment. He heard snoring. He peeked under the bed to see Zim curled up asleep in a pile of crumbs and dust, using half the loaf of Wonder bread for a pillow. The other half of the loaf was gone.

Great. Zim only went to sleep when something was wrong with him and now he was full of an entire loaf of bread and Dib was going to have to bring him onto a helicopter when he'd gotten sick after only fifteen minutes in the car. Wonderful.

Dib went closer and got down on his hands and knees in the one spot where there was no soup. He tapped Zim on the shoulder and Zim sat up really fast and hit his head on the underside of the bed. "Oww..."

"We're going," Dib said.

"What?" Zim crawled out from under the bed, blinking owlishly. "Ehh? What's all this soup from? What have you been *doing*, Dib?"

Dib ignored him. "We're going to my house now," he said.

Zim stood up. "Oh, okay, mhm," he mumbled. He and GIR followed Dib into the living room. "Dad," Dib said. "Zim's house blew up too. He's an alien, look. No disguise."

"That poor child, he's deathly ill! look at his eyes!" Dad said. He leaned down close to Zim. "Take your toy and get into the helicopter, little boy."

Dib sighed.

Zim picked up GIR by the arm and got into the helicopter. Dib and Gaz got in after him, and they took off.

"Well, Doctor Ragno," the man said. He stood up. "I can see that you're eminently qualified for this position."

He held out his hand. Tak took it. Her hand was swallowed up by the human's hand completely. "Thank you," she said.

"When can you start?"

His hand was hot and sweaty, and he reeked.

"Immediately," she said.

Chapter Six.

Zim was sitting in a bare metal room, on a table. He could hear restaurant noises from just outside the room- it sounded like Shluogorh's. Yes, Shluogorh's. He could hear Sizz Lorr bedowing.

Dib walked into the room, very tall, eight feet tall at least. He was wearing a long white coat and holding a cleaver. "Are you ready for your surgery?"

"No," Zim said, "not particularly." The large, partially rotting housefly-wings that had sprouted in place of his Pak were ugly and painful and were going to slowly poison him, he knew, but he certainly didn't feel ready for Dib to cut them out.

"That's too bad," Dib said. He spun Zim around. He wasn't going for the back after all- the traitorous Dib was going to cut Zim's guts open like he'd always wanted.

Zim jumped off the table and ran out into the restaurant. GIR was standing there, on one of the tables-

but he was all wrong. His eyes were red, and he was just... wrong. "You thought you could outrun me?" he said, in Sizz Lorr's voice. Minimouse was floating next to him, and Minimouse looked angry.

Zim turned, but he was staring at one of the empty, closed hallways of the white building. He looked down at himself and saw an autopsy cut spread across his chest and belly. It was leaking black ooze. He had not gotten away from Dib in time after all.

Now there was something thin and cold looped around his throat. "You've failed again," a voice whispered, as the metal wire cut through the soft skin of his throat like a knife through softened butter.

Zim woke up in a start, in a cold sweat, his breathing ragged and catching in his throat. He was lying out in the open, on something soft. His forehead was pressed up against something fuzzy and bad-smelling. Must be GIR.

"Did I sleep?" he asked. His voice sounded low and phlegmy. He opened his eyes and saw green dog suit. "GIR? How long was I... not awake?"

GIR said nothing. Zim took him by the shoulder and shook him a little. There was no response. "GIR?"

Nothing.

Zim sat up, rubbing his eyes. He felt dizzy. He was sitting on a bed in a room that looked both familiar and unfamiliar. He did not know where he could be. His back hurt. "Where are we?" The place didn't *smell* familiar. It all smelled very new, like it had just been built. Nothing seemed *wrong* about it, though.

There was still no answer.

Zim slid down the side of the bed to the floor. GIR was completely still and silent. Maybe Gir had turned him off.

Zim grabbed GIR's arm and dragged him off of the bed; he hit the floor with a thump. "You're heavy," Zim mumbled.

There was a desk and a computer in the room. The color scheme was navy blue and black. There were windows to the outside world, but they were barred up.

There was a door, too. Zim tried it and it opened, and he was looking at a hallway.

It was the hallway outside Dib's bedroom. Zim was standing in Dib's bedroom, only all the paranormal crap on the walls was gone and it didn't smell like Dib anymore. And the windows were barred. And this place was supposed to be a crater.

"Hm," Zim said to himself, dragging GIR down the staircase.

Dib was sitting in the kitchen. His hair and coat blended into the dark walls, leaving a ghostly face and glittering glasses seeming to hang alone in midair.

"There you are," he said out of the darkness.

"How long have I been sleeping?"

"Oh, a while. Please," Dib gestured across the table. "Have a seat."

Zim sat down, because he was still a little lightheaded, not because Dib had told him to. He dug his knuckles into his eyes. "How did I get here?"

"You don't remember getting in the helicopter."

"I remember getting in. I don't remember getting back out."

"That's because you fell asleep on the way here. Dad carried you inside." Dib wrinkled up his nose, scowling. "He still thinks you're a kid."

The hood flopped off of GIR's dog costume and three packages of salami rolled out.

Zim picked up the salami and looked at it. "GIR!"

"He's in the living room," Dib said. "We have a lot to talk about, Zim."

"GIR." Zim said again. GIR's dog suit did not have GIR in it. It had salami in it.

"He's in the living room. Now-"

"I lost him," Zim said.

"GIR?" Dib had that really annoying "I am angry, but I'm controlling myself because I think I'm better than you" face on. (At least, that was how Zim interpreted that look.) "Because he's in the living room. He's literally about ten feet away from you."

"No, Minimoose. He's gone. They took him," Zim said.

"What?"

"The white building. They took my Minimoose." Zim had never admitted that out loud before.

"Is that where he went?" Dib asked. "I wondered where-"

"GIR..."

"Okay." Dib stood up. "Fine." He left the room.

GIR's dog suit was full of salami. Zim had sent Minimoose to defend the base from the white building humans, and they had taken him instead.

Zim had a pounding headache.

Dib came back into the room, holding GIR. He dropped GIR in Zim's lap.

"You smell like nachos," GIR said, nuzzling Zim's neck.

"Are you ready to talk now?" Dib asked.

Zim wriggled in his seat, trying to find a more comfortable position. He had a sore spot between his shoulder blades, right over his Pak. "I guess." He'd wanted GIR to be where he could keep an eye on him, he hadn't wanted GIR to be in his lap. GIR smelled far worse than salami.

"Well here's the thing " Dib folded his hands together "My dad is going to General Labs. He's probably there now. They stole his inventions."

"Your father?"

"Yes, Zim, that's what 'dad' means " Zim knew what 'dad' meant, he'd just... he was *tired*. "He's trying to shut everything down."

"Will he be able to accomplish that?"

"I..." Dib took off his glasses and looked at them, then put them back on. "I don't know. He should be. But Zim? If he doesn't come out, you are not going to do anything to the building. Do you hear me? If my dad's inside General Labs, you are not going to blow it up."

Zim nodded. He put GIR down- GIR was reaching for the salami on the floor.

Dib leaned over the table. He looked pale and tired, and also quite angry. "I know you're evil and your word won't mean anything, but I want you to give it to me anyway." He held his hand out. "Swear on the Almighty Tallest that you won't hurt my dad."

Zim did not like being reminded that Dib knew about the Tallest. He could be killed for treason over letting Dib find out so much. "You have my word," said Zim, "but I will not touch your filthy human paw."

Dib sat back down.

Zim laced his fingers together and leaned his elbows on the table. "If your father can indeed single-handedly defeat the white building, he must have incredible power," he thought aloud.

"It's called General Labs. Come on. Just say its name. It's not Voldemort."

Zim did not understand 'Voldemort'... nor did he care to make a serious attempt to.

"Dad doesn't want us following him," Dib said. "He put the house on lockdown and told the school we won't be attending for a while. There's a tunnel in the basement we can use to get out, if we need to, though- it's his secret exit. It leads right to Membrane Labs, so if we take that route we'll need to disguise ourselves as techs."

"Mnhmm," Zim said. "I need to go home."

"Well, there's another thing," Dib said. "I tried to get Dad to drop you off at your house. Your base is gone. Not just the exploded top level. The underground part's been dug out of the ground. I think we can guess who did that."

"Oh," Zim mumbled. He propped his face in his hands.

Dib laced his fingers together. "So that's that. Why were you sleeping? You only sleep when something's wrong with you."

"I don't know." Zim closed his eyes.

"How do you feel?"

"Not so." Zim opened one eye. Dib was watching him intently. "You can't fool me, Dib."

"Fool you? I'm not trying to fool."

"Of course you aren't! You really care how I feel, I can tell."

Dib rolled his eyes. "Okay, obviously not, but I'm not going to try to kill you. I just want to know what to expect. I'm trapped in the same house with you."

"What to expect?"

"Look." Dib leaned forward. "Last night, you freaked out and beat me up with a pool cue. The night before that, I spent an hour awake in a tent listening to you cry. And I'm kind of sick of it."

Zim's antennae stood straight up and he inhaled sharply. "I did not cry!"

Dib inclined his head to the side, narrowing his eyes. "If I didn't know better, Zim, I'd think you were emotionally traumatized." His tone was neutral now, not hostile. "You're acting the way people do after witnessing hauntings. And I don't mean like the lake. I mean poltergeists and the victims of brutal killings."

Zim scoffed and pressed his hands together to stop them from trembling.

"Of course," Dib said. "I know better. You're an inhuman monster. You're not traumatized."

Zim looked down at the table. There was a little splat of something on the plastic surface that smelled like ketchup. Zim forced back a sudden flutter of nausea. "Of course not. What would that even mean?"

"Well, it's different for different people." Dib raised an eyebrow, glanced at Zim, and then glanced away. "Sometimes people lose interest in activities they used to enjoy. I enjoy horribly with hideous evil glee. You know, evil things."

"Uh huh."

"Horrible, nasty things like cutting into sentient beings. Some people used to be sick and enjoy stuff like that." Exactly what point was Dib trying to make here? "People will stop being able to do their jobs. They can't stop thinking about what happened."

"Yes, yes, it sounds like a hideous human weakness. Horrible. No Irken would be caught dead showing such incompetence. Is there a cure?"

Dib drummed his fingers on the table. "We usually send afflicted parties to the Eyeballs counseling branch."

Zim snorted. "Therapy?"

"Yeah, you . . . probably don't have that back on Irik."

Zim had been to a few different psychiatrists as part of his Invader screening. It had been sort of fun. He'd sat in a little room and talked about himself. The psychiatrists listened to him. Sometimes they left the room crying and didn't come back, though...

Anyway, none of that had ever seemed very helpful. "Is that the best you can do? A lot of talking?"

"It helps some people. Some people like to talk about themselves, you know. Endlessly. To strangers." Dib muttered. "There are medications for some things, but I don't think they would work on your species."

"How can simple talking fix what sounds like such a disgusting impairment of normal human function?" Zim leaned across the table. He felt his antennae tick upwards. "If someone can no longer do what they were bred for over *centuries* of careful genetic selection geared by the master Control Brains towards creating the finest war machines in the universe, and then trained for a lifetime to perform that very task, then . . ." He clasped his hands together. "Hypothetically speaking."

"Of course," Dib said.

"How would . . ." Zim's voice broke. His throat must be dry or something. He swallowed. He realized he was standing up in his seat. "How would just talking to someone fix that?"

"It doesn't." Dib shrugged. "I think therapists are all liars." He made a fist. "They say what they think you want to hear while they really don't believe a word you say. Then they steal from you and—" Dib cleared his throat and put his hands down on the table. "I'm sorry. Continue."

"I . . ." Zim sat back down. "I was finished."

"I see. Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Zim swung his legs back and forth. Looking under the table at GIR happily eating his disgusting human filth, he noticed Dib's feet reached the floor. Zim's didn't. Their chairs were the same size. Hadn't Dib once been the same size, too?

"Well, it's late." Dib stood up, so tall. "And I haven't been sleeping well . . . thanks to you. So I'm going to eat something and go to bed."

"Okay " Zim folded his arms on the table

Dib got up and took something out of a cabinet and walked away unwrapping it and eating it

"It's okay Master " GJR chirped from under the table "You just don't have any friends!"

"Heh, yeah," Zim said, and he heaved a sigh.

Tak had been given an office in the corner. It had a desk, a computer and a little potted plant (the plant smelled awful and she disliked it).

She put a box of personal effects on the desk. 'Personal' here was relative. She only had these for appearances, obviously.

She set a mug down next to the computer. A tiny moving speck darted out from under the mug. She was careful to show no notice of it. It was a tiny bug she'd invented herself. It would scurry into that security camera plainly mounted on the wall and report back what the camera system was recording.

Tak set down a picture frame with a picture of Mami, disguised, of course, in it. Zim had reported that all the cameras in here were hidden. Zim had reported a lot of things that were completely wrong about this place. Of course he'd seen a different version of the organization but... no, she was pretty sure he was just wrong.

Something buzzed in her antenna. She bit back a yelp.

"Tak! Invader Skoodge reporting in, sir!"

Okay, he'd decided she was his superior officer now? Sure, okay. She was fine with that. She wasn't as fine with 'sir'.

However, he did know she couldn't *reply*, right? She couldn't let on that she had an accomplice in any way. She had not planned for Skoodge. She barely even knew Skoodge. She said nothing, continuing to set up her office things instead.

"The camera images are coming in loud and clear!" he said. "Except they're pictures so they're not loud! Um, Sir!"

She couldn't answer him right now.

"I can see you!" he informed her.

Which was why she couldn't *answer him*.

"Okay " Skoodge said. "well, I'll go do some other mission-related thing then, Sir." Again. That was the third 'sir'.

He hung up.

Tak wanted to sigh aloud, but the video camera was right there. Wait. Skoodge had said 'they're pictures and not loud' - did that mean the cameras didn't even have audio?

It didn't matter- she couldn't show any observable reaction, regardless.

She kept setting up her office.

She heard a voice from outside the room. "I demand to see the leader of this place immediately- you are infringing on my personal copyright but what's more- you are infringing on the safety of ALL MANKIND and the sanctity of SCIENCE! I will tear this place apart brick by brick!"

The voice faded away as the speaker went down the hallway
Hmmm.

Surely any ordinary human who overheard *that* would want to investigate. Tak went to the door and tried to open it, but it wouldn't open. The knob turned normally- but the door seemed to be lodged in the frame.

Under the circumstances it would definitely not seem out of line for her to try to get the door open. Tak pushed on it, pulled on it, investigated the frame for obstructions- she found none- and called: "Hey! HEY! I'm stuck!"

There was no answer. "HELP!" She pounded on the door with both fists- because- because she was pretending to be a neurotic human of course- nothing more than- "HELP ME! SOMEONE! ANYONE! HLLP!" No one would come. They never did. She'd be trapped here for hours.

"Tak?" Skoodge said in her communicator. "Are you, uh, okay?"

Skoodge: If she called for him would he really come get her? She didn't need to do that right now, of course. It was just a stupid door. A stupid, stinking door.
She kicked the door.

The handle was turning from the other side. Tak found that she'd automatically taken up a fighting stance. She tried to relax and look more like a nerdy scientist.

The door opened. Tak wilted in relief. A human with brown hair and a very boring face was standing there. He gave her an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry about that," he said. "The door was stuck."

Very conveniently stuck, thought Tak. She clasped her hands together. "Oh, well, accidents will happen... hopefully *that* will *never* happen again!"

"Oh, I'm sure it won't! Have you set up your office?"

"Yes, it's very lovely. Thank you for this honey houseplant!" The houseplant absolutely reeked. The man bobbed in a polite bow. "I'll tell management you said that. Come here- your first job is all lined up for you."

He offered his hand. She took it. It felt very- very odd. "All right," she said. He led her down the hallway.

D:b blinked. 3:12 AM, said his alarm clock. His new alarm clock. Dad had been able to rebuild his room, but not bring back the stuff that had been destroyed, like D:b's posters, his database, his research. His room was so empty.

Why had he woken up? Dib lay completely still, listening to his surroundings. He heard a voice from just outside in the hallway. A very *familiar* voice. A very familiar *alien* voice.

"Yes. Yes. I've been on hold. Yes. I've been on hold for some time now. Okay. No. Don't put me back on-" Zim sighed.

Who was he calling? His leaders?

Zim made some incoherent "I am annoyed to be on hold" noises for a while. Dib waited.

"Okay, finally," Zim said. "I need to speak to a doctor immediately over a private line."

Dib was now on full alert. Well, he'd already been on full alert. Now he was on *fuller* alert. Um.

"No, don't put me on-" Zim huffed. Dib heard something sloppily thump to the ground. Maybe that was Zim throwing something down in disgust. Or wrecking something in Dib's house.

There had to be something in here Dib could take notes on. He looked under the bed. No, of course there was nothing under the bed. There was nothing in his room at all now.

"Yes, hello," Zim was saying. "I need to speak with a doctor," he repeated. "On a secure line. Now. You are? It is? Good! I need to schedule an urgent surgery."

Dib pressed his ear against the door.

Zim was speaking in a harsh whisper that was probably even louder than his normal voice. "As soon as possible. Yes, it's life-threatening! I— official diagnosis? I am an Invader. I—" Zim was quiet for a good long minute. "Bud removal. What? No!" His whisper turned to a alarmed screech. "Not *bud* removal! Do you think I'm *joking* ? Do you? This is serious! I said bud! With a d. I'm an Irken. Don't you know anything about Irken anatomy?" He was quiet for a minute. "I require absolute privacy." He was mock-lowering his voice again. "How do I even know I can trust you?" Okay. Okay. Fine. I'll allow a prior examination but you have to be ready to operate on me as soon as you're done. I'm serious. When? I can make it there in... uh... ten hours... yes, okay.

There was a knock on Dib's door. Dib jumped a mile. "Dib?" Zim demanded. Dib opened the door.

"Good, you're up," Zim said.

"Well, I am *now*!"

"I need to borrow Tak's old spaceship. If you do not agree I will take it from you by force. It's in the garage, right?"

"Wow, sure, Zim. I'll just hand over my most prized possession to you, my worst enemy and a totally irresponsible jerk. I'll get right on that," Dib said.

"Good," Zim said.

Dib sighed. "I'm being sarcastic. I don't want to give you my ship. I really have to explain that? That's sad. Look. I overheard your conversation. Because you were right outside the door."

"But you were sleeping," Zim said.

"Sleeping people wake up. That's the funny thing about sleeping people." Zim looked as if he were filing that away. "Why do you need to see a doctor?"

"I—" Zim scowled.

"What's a 'bud removal'?"

"It's nothing to you— if you let me go take care of it." Zim flattened his antennae to his head. "My base is gone. So are my medical facilities."

"Well, what is it?" Dib started thinking out loud. "Bud implies growth, and—"

"Sh—" Zim was standing bolt upright, rigid, and trembling. His antennae were angled towards the doorway. "What was that?"

"Don't change the subject, I—"

Zim slammed the bedroom door and backed away from it. "I heard something."

Dib listened. He heard a thump from downstairs. "It's probably GIR. Or maybe Dad's back." He opened the door and rushed out.

"Dib—"

"We're in lockdown." Dib said, looking over his shoulder. "Nothing can get in here. Calm down."

Dib headed down the stairs. He flicked on the lights and saw a massive, hulking beast in the living room.

The werewolf stood about six feet tall and was nearly as wide as it was tall. Its eyes glowed blood red and green drool dripped out from between its fangs and landed on the carpet with audible splatting noises.

"Wow!" Dib said. A prime male specimen in the peak of health! It had such a bushy coat. The werewolf took a jerky step forward. Its eyes were glazed, and it was panting wetly. There was a collar around its neck, a collar Dib thought he had seen before—oh. Oh right. The werewolf probably wanted to maul him. But Dib had a pistol with silver bullets! In his bedroom.

That had been destroyed. So now he didn't have a pistol with silver bullets. He was unarmed, actually.

Perhaps Dib should run. Oh wait, all the exits were blocked up apart from the hole in the wall; the werewolf was standing in front of

The wolf lunged. Dib dodged and ran back up the stairs, right into a screaming pile of alien. "I TOLD YOU I HEARD SOMETHING!"

There was a series of metallic clicks and then Zim climbed over Dib on his spider legs. He stopped about halfway down the stairs. "What's that on its neck?"

The werewolf snarled. Zim backed up, whining in his throat. His body compressed into a little frightened pellet suspended by mechanical legs. "They put one of those on me. No!"

The werewolf started to come up the stairs. It was moving much more slowly than werewolves usually did, but it was still pretty darn dangerous. "Zim, stab it." Dib said. "Just stab it dead. It's going to tear your throat out." He realized what Zim was talking about- that collar was from General Labs. Zim had indeed worn it- or one just like it. The specific one the werewolf was wearing looked too big for Zim...

"They sent a beast," Zim said, "a monster, to capture me."

"KILL IT!" Dib grabbed his own hair and yanked it. "IT'S RIGHT THERE! STAB IT! I SHOULDN'T HAVE TO TELL YOU THIS!" Why wasn't the thing attacking yet?

Dib looked down at the bottom of the stairs and saw GIR. Just standing there, looking up at the werewolf, who seemed confused.

"Hi," GIR said.

"No," Zim said, skittering down the stairs. "HEY! WOLF!" The wolf turned its glowing red eyes on Zim, who was finally rearing back a leg to stab it with. "Yes, you! LOOK UPON THE DOOM THAT IS."

The werewolf struck out with one huge paw- the blow was so fast and forceful it barely registered in Dib's vision and then Zim was crumpled against the wall, making dizzy noises for a few seconds and then going very quiet.

Dib backed up a step. The wolf's eyes were locked on him. There was nowhere to run, and nothing in the house Dib knew of that would be effective against a werewolf.

Was it... was it weird that what Dib really wanted was his camera?
Probably.

"Hi," GIR said, waving at the wolf. The wolf threw GIR in the same crumpled heap as his master and headed up the stairs towards Dib.

"What is all this NOISE?" Gaz hollered from somewhere to Dib's right.

He backed away from the approaching werewolf. "Gaz, get in your room and shut the door!"

"What is that thing?" He didn't dare take his eyes off the wolf to see where she was but she sounded closer now.

"It's a werewolf and it's super dangerous and it can only be hurt by silver and..."

It pounced. Dib ducked and rolled and hit Gaz who kicked him and then ran into her bedroom. Good. She was out of harm's way.

The wolf stood in the hallway, pawing at the collar around its neck and snorting.

Gaz burst out of her room, holding a small, sharp knife in one hand. "Is that silver?" Dib asked.

"Yeah," she grunted.

"Where did you get..."

She ran down the hallway. The wolf turned towards her, snarling, and she rammed the knife into its fur. It lunged for her, engulfing her in its claws. Its teeth dove for her face.

Dib ran for her. She punched the wolf's jaws away from her head. It seemed to take him forever to get all the way across the floor. He tackled Gaz, thinking that he could shield her with her body.

Warm sludge cascaded over his body. It reeked of rotting meat and bile and blood.

Gaz cried out in revulsion and tried to push Dib away. Something heavy fell on top of him. He scrabbled at it, thinking it was an attack by the wolf, but it... it was dead.

Zirks Pak legs were a silver alloy. Gaz's knife was apparently pure silver.

Dib was covered in bloody werewolf vomit. Gaz pulled herself out from beneath him and pulled her knife out of the wolf's fur.

It was shrinking. Dib pulled himself out from under the corpse. It was now a skinny man with patchy brown hair.

"We killed this guy," Dib said.

"Evaugh," Gaz said, heading into the bathroom, presumably to wash up.

Dib tried to shake some of the yuck off his hands. The stench was intense.

He crouched down by the body. "You never get used to it," Agent Darkbooty had said. "Seeing the monster turn back into an innocent man or woman."

Dib felt very cold. He looked down into the stairway. GIR was sitting and holding his head in his hands. Zim was gone, but there was a smear of his watered-down pink blood on the wall.

The shower was running in the bathroom. Dib would have to use the one downstairs. He picked his way around the dead body and down the stairs. He went into the bathroom and hosed himself off without removing his clothes.

He went into the living room. "We have to go," he said aloud, to no one, because no one else was in the room that he could tell. "We have to get out of here."

He heard a soft moaning. He looked under the coffee table and saw Zim sitting there with his head hanging. "Yes," he said, slurring a bit. "Out."

There was a bad bruise on the back of Zim's head and one antennae had broken near the base and was dangling by a thread. There were claw marks scored into his face.

"Come out here," Dib said. "We're going to go through the tunnel in the basement."

Zim crawled out from under the table. He stood up, wobbling. "Uh."

"You okay?"

"No."

"Can you walk?"

Zim tried a few steps. "Yes."

"You're okay, then."

"GIR must come with us."

"I'll get him."

Dib went to the stairway. He picked up GIR and went up the stairs, skirting the corpse, and to the bathroom door. "Gaz, we're leaving."

She grunted.

Dib went into his bedroom, realized there was nothing in there to take with him, and came back out. Gaz was going into her bedroom, wrapped in a towel. Dib waited a moment for her to come out fully clothed.

"We have to get out of here," he told her.

She gave him a long, cold stare. "Fine," she said. She brushed past Dib and down the stairs.

Dib followed her. In the living room, he gave GIR back to Zim, and all four of them went down into the lab and through Dad's secret access tunnel out of the house.

Chapter Seven

The basement tunnel was long and crooked and dark. Dib could hear his footsteps thumping against the dirt floor. They echoed slightly—the ceiling was high and domed, and seemed much higher than should actually be possible for something coming out of a basement. Hm.

He shouldn't have been able to hear such silence, with both Zim and GIR nearby. "So how about that," he said aloud to hear a voice.

"How about what?" Gaz asked.

"Never mind," said Dib, who suddenly didn't feel like talking after all.

Zim was hanging around by Dib's leg, leading GIR by the hand. Hm. Zim wasn't usually the touchy-feely sort.

GIR's eyes were flickering gray and he was pawing at a large dent in his forehead and moaning.

"Is he broken?" Dib asked.

Zim heaved a deep, shuddering sigh and shook his head slowly.

"Right," Dib said. "Stupid question."

The tunnel was very long. At the end of it, Dad had hung up a few spare lab coats. Dib and Gaz each put one on. Dib had to roll up the sleeves a little. Gaz had to roll up the sleeves a lot.

It was out of the question to try putting a coat on either Zim or GIR. "We'll find something," Dib said. He climbed up the ladder into Membrane Labs's basement. The others followed.

They came out into a large, dark room with faint green patterns of light playing on the ceiling. Despite the green light, it was too dark for Dib to be able to see what was in there.

"Where's the door?" he muttered. He started to hold his arms out to feel his way around but realized there might be open electrical circuits or corrosive liquids or—who knows what else. There was a gross chemical smell in the room.

"Can't you see in the dark?" Gaz asked.

"No," Dib said.

"Not you, the stupid alien."

"Oh. Yeah. Yeah, he can't. Zim, where's the door?"

There was a moment of long silence.
"Zim?"

"Over there " Zim sounded gravelly
Dib wrinkled up his nose. "Are you pointing?"

"I am very clearly showing you exactly where the door is."

"I can't see you pointing you know it's dark. That's why I need to know where the door is in the first place " Should they be keeping their voices down? Who was here?
Zim made some mumbly noises that didn't seem to have any real purpose. "To your left," he said.
Dib moved towards the left
"No, not that way!"

Dib sighed. Of course Zim didn't know right from left. Zim didn't know anything. "Grab my coat," he said. "Tug it in the right direction. Gaz, take my hand."

She did so without complaint. Zim yanked on the hem of Dib's coat and Dib moved in that direction. His knee hit something warm that said "Ow."

"I can't see " Dib said for what felt like the fiftieth time. "If you don't get out of the way, I'll step on you."

Zim mumbled something. Dib could only make out the words "Dib" and "too big"

Gaz was saying something. "Is there a light switch?"

"Good thinking. Gaz. A light switch would be way more helpful!" Dib wondered why he hadn't thought of that.

Dib heard some clicking and thumping noises from Zim's general direction. His eyes had adjusted enough to the darkness to pick up a small shape moving around.

Something fell over. "Ow!"

"Are you okay?" Dib sighed.

"No." Zim muttered something. A bright blue glow lit up the room. Zim was holding some kind of lit-up alien orb.

"Finally." Dib said, letting go of Gaz's hand. "You should have done that in the first place." Zim scowled.

The room was filled with tangles of machinery that Dib couldn't identify. It was a smaller room than he would have expected.

Dib found the door. He held it open while the others went through and then followed them out. Now they were in a hallway.

It was a large hallway. Dib might even go so far as to call it cavernous. Zim's little orb thing couldn't light the whole place up and the walls and ceiling were in shadow.

Zim transferred the orb into one hand and inched backwards and sideways towards Dib's leg. He reached out across Dib's knees to where GIR was standing on the other side of him, caught the robot's skinny wrist and pulled him in front of Dib to stand close by Zim's side.

"Which way is out?" Dib muttered. This place looked different in the glowy blue light. Gaz started walking down the hall. Dib followed her. Zim and GIR followed Dib.

"You smell," Zim said.

"Thanks, space boy."

"You smell of death, and vomit, and blood and, and- madness!"

"Preciate it," Dib said.

Zim shuddered. The orb light was turning his face teal and his eyes purple, and casting weird shadows on his face that made him look like he was wearing cheesy Halloween skul mask makeup. The cuts on his face were nearly gone. Freaky alien healing factor.

"He's right, you reek," Gaz said. Oh, right. The werewolf gunk. Dib had stopped smelling it.

He cleared his throat. "After a while, paranormal slime stops bothering a trained investigator." Zim hugged the orb tightly to his chest, wrapping his arm around it and blocking off some of the light. The other arm was dragging GIR around like a weird and stinky toy. "I guessed you missed your doctor's appointment," Dib said.

Zim's antennae drooped. "Ugh, yes, whatever. Some doctor. Think they know more than Zim."

"But you were going to go to one anyway."

Zim shut his mouth and looked away.

"Why?" Dib prodded.

Zim shook his head.

"Why are you asking him that?" Gaz said.

"Because I need to know if I'm going to protect."

"He's sick," Gaz interrupted. "That's why he's going to the doctor. Duh. Now be quiet, or the guards will find us, and if I have to fight them off, I will make you miserable." Dib was quiet.

The hallway seemed to stretch into infinity. Dib was just thinking about how no one was here and they didn't really need their lab coat disguises after all- and it was obnoxious to have the collar of his coat covering his face- when they turned a corner into a brightly lit room.

Dib recoiled, flinching in the sudden brightness. When he dared open his eyes he saw three men in white coats huddled around a table, staring at him.

Dib swallowed.

"Professor Membrane." one of the scientists said, edging over to hide whatever he'd been working on. "I didn't expect to see you this late!"

Oh no. Dad! Dib whirled around and saw no one behind him. Maybe Dad had finally perfected that teleportation project. Maybe he'd gone off to get the crazy collar- but if he was here- he'd gotten safely out of General Labs and he'd probably shut it down and everything was probably okay-

"What are you looking at, Professor?" another of the scientists asked.

"He's busy." Gaz droned. "What's the new security code for garage 3?"

"Ghostbusters Lie," one of the men said.

"Yeah, it just changed over from My Insane Son," another of the men said.

"Fine. We have to go." She took Dib's arm and pulled him down the hall.

"Bye, Professor." one of the scientists called. But Dib still didn't see any sign of-

Oh. Oh.

Gaz was muttering something uncomplimentary. Dib heard Zam whining in the back of his throat. The scientists hadn't noticed either him or GIR- normally Dib would be infuriated by that. Oh well.

They went up a staircase into a room full of concrete and what looked like small black airplanes. Gaz went directly to a keypad by a door and started punching keys.

"Man, you really know your way around," Dib said.

Gaz shrugged.

"When did you learn all this stuff?" he asked.

"I come here every weekend. You're always out with your alien."

"What?" Dib scrunched up his nose. "He's not my alien! He's just some alien! And usually I'm chasing something else, like-"

"It doesn't matter," Gaz said. A green light turned on and she walked through the door. They went out into the cool night air. It felt good. Dib had been getting hot inside the lab. He hadn't thought Dad's lab was usually so warm.

Dib took a deep breath and removed the goggles he was wearing. He looked at the lenses, trying to get them to reflect his face. Did he really look *that* much like Dad in this getup?

Zim popped his little tight-up thing back into his Pak. He was shivering. Dib noticed. "Okay, we need a car," Dib muttered. "I'll call a ta-"

Gaz was walking over to a nearby car. She was doing something to it and then she was getting inside it. Zim floundered over to the car, making those little half-grunt, half-yelp noises he made and pulled himself into the backseat, hauling GIR in after him.

Gaz started up the engine with a roar. "Get in the car, Dib."

Later, Dib would need to know where his little sister had learned to steal cars, but right now he was content to shut up and get in the passenger seat.

Tak placed the rabbit back in its cage. It sat there a moment, twitching, and then lay down on its side. She triple-locked its cage door as she had been instructed to do.

Tak's new boss had not told her what the injections she'd given the animal- the hot, smelly, quivering, filthy little animal- would do, but judging from what she knew about the place it was supposed to turn into some kind of monster.

She turned and surveyed the room. There were twelve more cages and twelve more rabbits. Three of them were presumably a control group. She'd injected the others with three different kinds of chemicals.

At first when she heard Skoodge speaking in her radio she ignored him. Skoodge had been randomly contacting her all day, either to ask what she was doing (she couldn't answer), or to say she was doing a good job. Half the time it sounded like his mouth was full of food when he was talking, and if he had raided her food stores she was going to pound him.

Then what he was saying sunk in. "-Dib's dad? Down the hall. He's saying stuff I think is important!"

It took her a moment to remember who Dib was. But of course. Dib was Zim's oh-so-smart little human friend. If Dib's father was around, Dib was likely around, and if Dib was around, Tak thought she would pretend to go look for the ladies' room. She went out onto the hall. "a.d. wrong!" she heard a man saying. She headed up and down the hallway, reading signs on the doors.

"Are you lost?" Skoodge asked. Several times that day Tak had considered turning off her radio, but she couldn't do it without the motion being recorded on the security cameras.

"I know what you're trying to do," the voice said, "but I've guarded myself against all brainwashing methods. Now-" The man screamed, "Where are you taking me? This is insane! I will personally ruin-" The voice faded away.

Hm, interesting. Tak headed in the direction the voice was coming from.

A red light flashed and an alarm sounded in the hall. Tak scurried backwards, yelping.

"What's that?" Skoodge said. "What's happening?"

"Warning," a recorded voice said. "Containment breach. All personnel clearance level E or lower must leave the building immediately."

Tak had been told she was a clearance level Z. She ran down the hall. She had no intention of leaving, of course. She intended to find out what was happening while appearing to be unable to find the exit.

She turned the corner and was knocked to the floor by a frantic human who trampled right over her and kept running.

"HEY!" she yelled after him. "That was RUDE!"

He was long gone. She wanted to hunt him down and either kill him or hypnotize him into doing something very foolish. How dare he trample her? Had people no common decency?

But there was work to be done. Tak headed in the direction he'd been running from. She heard a scream from somewhere within the building. The red lights were still flashing (and they had no noticeable source; she realized, it was as if the light came from the air itself) and the recorded warning was repeating itself over and over again.

Wait, it had changed.

"There has been a leak of hallucinogenic gas. Any of you who see anything strange or disturbing are in no real danger. If you see anything unusual, simply turn and walk the other-"

Skoodge screamed right into her radio, very loudly. Taken aback, Tak sagged at the knees and clutched her antennae. Blast, now anyone watching could guess she had a radio! And possibly that she had antennae; she didn't know how much her hologram hid-

"TAK! TAK, RUN AWAY! RUN AWAY! IT'S HORRIBLE, IT'S HORRIBLE!"

"WHAT?" she snapped. Blast! She'd answered him, stupid stinking Skoodge! She knew it; other people could only ever ruin-

There was a meaty thump ahead of her. She looked up.

Up ahead was another corner, and there was a human lying on the floor, female, bleeding, trying to sit up and moaning. A large piece of the human's torso was missing. Her head rolled over and her eyes looked into Tak's.

"He-he-hel!" Blood bubbled out of the human's mouth. There was more blood splattered across her glasses. She was wearing blue pants and a colorful short-sleeved shirt with a picture of another human on it. She certainly wasn't dressed as a scientist—*who was she?* She had a paper name tag on that read 'Hanna Davis', handwritten. The staff Tak had seen weren't wearing name tags.

The human's eyes took on a very particular shade of nothing and she stopped struggling. The smell of blood was intense.

Tak heard a deep moan from around the corner, and a wet swishing noise. She smelled decay. Skoodge was whimpering. Tak backed up a step.

A large thing came around the corner. It was about six feet tall, and had a somewhat amorphous shape. It had no skin, and the exposed musculature looked damp and sticky. It smelled of disease and rot, and there were strings of pus on its limbs. It had no eyes, and no neck, but it did have a lump of meat that might have been a head, with a gaping toothless hole that might have been a mouth. Said hole was dribbling blood. It was holding a red-stained shard of glass.

"Oh, well then," Tak heard herself say, rather stupidly. Her legs wouldn't move.

The thing raised its makeshift weapon at her. Tak watched, and her legs still would not move.

The humans had taken members of their own species and stripped them of skin, inflicted various wounds and diseases onto them, and preserved them within tubes. The sight was revolting. A lesser Irken would have fled or maybe vomited at seeing something so horrible. Zany's report.

Tak popped up onto her metal legs, realizing as soon as she did so that her cover was now blown. She'd had no choice.

The thing came for her and she speared it through the head. It moaned. Her leg was stuck in its wrongly-textured flesh, the creature's blood leaking out from around it. She pulled on the leg. It stayed stuck. She slashed the thing's throat with another leg. It grabbed that leg, and pulled her close and shoved the piece of glass into her belly.

Tak pressed her hands on each side of the wound, feeling the warmth of her own spreading blood soaking into her uniform. Her mouth hung open. The human blood on the glass bubbled in her flesh. The pain seemed to fill her entire body. She couldn't even scream.

The thing reached up and tore her spider leg out of its head, ripping its own head in two in the process. It threw her to the ground.

Tak's metal legs withdrew back into her Pak. She lay for a minute, gasping and feeling hot tears of pain leak onto her face.

She heard a gunshot and more blood splattered onto her face and it burned. "No!" a man yelled. "We need it!"

Tak was still bleeding. How badly was she hurt and was any of the human blood that had gotten into the wound contaminated with anything infectious?

She couldn't get up.

She heard footsteps. Another gunshot. A wet thump. A human stood over her. He pinned her down with a foot on her chest.

Skoodge was whimpering in her radio.

Tak coughed and gasped.

"Goodness," the human said. "Your cover didn't last very long, now did it?"

Her eyes went wide. She sucked in a deep breath.

"You have been criminally condemned by the Almighty Tallest themselves," she choked out. "I've been given clearance to destroy you. If you let me go now, your end will be less painful- if you make trouble, my allies will descend to torture you."

"Sure," the human said. He covered Tak's eyes with his hand.

Everything was dark and he was sitting up in a seat, slumped against something hard, maybe plastic, and not too comfortable. Time to investigate. Where was he and why was it dark? Oh, his eyes were closed. He opened them, and saw the inside of a car.

The first two mysteries were solved. The third mystery, his arm was sore. He was trying to figure out why when Gaz punched him a second time and all became clear.

Dib reached up to adjust his glasses, which had slipped to the side and dug into his cheek. His head pounded dully. He hadn't had a full night's sleep in a while now, he realized.

The inside of the car was lit up with sunshine. Dib had not been able to see what it looked like last night in the dark. It was beige. Pleather seats. Not very interesting. There was a weird stain on the ceiling.

"Oh gosh, you must want me to take over driving." Dib's voice came out in a sleepy mumble. He rubbed his eyes and picked the sleep gunk out of them. Gaz must have been driving for hours.

"No," Gaz said through clenched teeth. Her shoulders were hunched and her arms were locked straight, hands in a death grip on the steering wheel. Her eyes were open. There were two empty coffee cups in the cupholders. Big ones. "Fix your alien."

Dib sat bolt upright, the sudden motion sending a jolt through his head. "He's not my alien. What is this, your alien stuff? He's not my pet. He's my sworn nemesis, and he's evil, and slimy, and-"

"Just fix it!"

"And he's a him, not an it- you know. Zim, you talk to him sometimes, he's not an animal. My life would be way easier if he was, you know."

"FIX HIM!"

"Okay, okay." Dib wriggled in his seat. He was sure. He must have picked up a few bruises in the werewolf fight. The car was warm and stuffy and smelled like a horrible combination of werewolf gunk, coffee, GIR, and sick alien. Ewww...

He turned around to look into the backseat. Zim was sitting in the middle of the seat, hunched over, cradling his sides with both hands, head hanging, breathing loudly. "So why do you need fixing?" Dib sighed.

"I don't," Zim said in a strained voice. "Your sister decided she dislikes the sound of my *breath*. Oddly enough, I'm not willing to stop breathing to obage her."

Dib looked him up and down.

Zim reached up to fiddle with the base of one antenna. His hand was shaking. "You can't help me anyway," he said.

"Because I'm some stupid human or whatever, because I've heard all the-"

"No one can help me!" Well, whatever was wrong with him, it hadn't affected his ability to be dramatic.

Dib rolled his eyes. "Help you with what?"

Zim held his head in his hands. "Changing."

Dib looked sideways at Gaz, whose knuckles were white on the wheel. Her eyes were still wide open and her teeth were grinding audibly. "Changing... clothes?" Dib said. He swallowed.

Zim massaged the sides of his ribcage with both hands. "Ohhh no. No, not clothes," he muttered. His voice had gotten low and gravelly.

"Okay. Um. You? You're changing? Physically?"

"Oh yes."

"How?"

Zim looked up at the ceiling. "If only I knew..."

Dib's skin was crawling. He felt clammy.

His foot hit something and he jumped a mile and looked down - there were four more huge coffee cups rolling around on the floor. "Gaz, how much coffee did you drink?"

"Nngh," she said.

Dib counted six very large empty cups in total. "Are you okay?" he asked.

Gaz snorted. Her lips pressed into a thin line. She hunched her shoulders and gave the steering wheel a sharp turn to the right. Dib fell into the passenger door and the handle stabbed his ribs. His stomach lurched.

The car screeched to a halt on the side of the road. Gaz opened her door.

"What- what the heck?" Dib gasped.

"I have to pee." Gaz growled, and she vanished into the tangle of woods that surrounded the road of both sides.

Dib turned around to face Zim in the backseat. "Can girls pee outside?" Not that Zim would know the answer.

Zim's lower lip was trembling.

"Oh," Dib said. This must be why Gaz had woken him up. "Okay, were you whining?" Gaz hates whiners.

"Yes I know."

Zim showed no visible evidence of mutation so far, at least. It was a very small comfort. "So?" Dib rubbed his temples. His skin felt very warm. "You have no idea how you're changing at all?" Zim shook his head, staring at the floor. His face crumpled.

"You know," Dib said. "I'm not too into whining either, to be brutally honest."

"It hurts!" Zim surged forward and grabbed double handfuls of Dib's shirt. "Help me!"

"I can't!" Dib blurted. "Let go of me!"

Zim let go and buried his face in his hands.

Dib's heart was beating fast. His palms were damp - he wiped them on his jacket. "I can't help you. Okay? I don't have any kind of... of medication, or anything. I can't help you."

Zim picked his head back up out of his hands. "They said," he said, raising an index finger with an absolutely ghastly attempt at a smile, "that this was like a slorbeast mauling. But I have *been* mauled by the mighty slorbeast. It's not quite *that* bad." His voice broke.

"Um, okay," said Dib, who had no idea what a slorbeast was. "Wait, where's GIR?"

"Right here " Zim motioned with his head. GIR was next to him in the seat, but he was turned off, eyes dim and gray. "Dib, L."

"You what?"

Zim shook his head. He clutched at his sides some more.

Dib realized he was hugging himself too. "Could you not do that?"

Zim blinked. "Not do what?"

"You're starting to..." Dib was going to say 'get to me' but he didn't want to give Zim the satisfaction. Besides, he probably just felt a little weird because he hadn't eaten in.

He checked the little car radio clock. It was around lunchtime. Yeah, he hadn't eaten in a while.

"Maybe you're not changing at all," he theorized. "Maybe the werewolf broke your ribs."

Zim sighed. He seemed calmer now, thank goodness. "Human. You don't think I know what broken ribs feel like?"

Dib had probably given Zim broken ribs at some point. "Well... I really can't help you."

"Okay." Zim slumped over, resting his elbows on his knees and heaving a sigh.

Dib did not want to talk anymore. He hunched over in his seat, realized he was mirroring Zim's position, and sat up straight.

Zim muffled. "You can do nothing at all?"

Dib closed his eyes, sighing. "I can't help you. I wouldn't even know how."

"Okay." He turned and started messing with GIR, adjusting the positions of the robot's limbs and head.

Dib ran his fingers through his hair. His hair felt gross and there were dried... bits of werewolf in it. He opened the passenger window for a little fresh air. "Zim, if you're contagious I'm going to kill you."

"Mph. What?"

"If I catch what you have, you will pay!"

"You can't catch what I have. I'm not sick." Zim said. "I'm approaching metamorphosis."

"Wait-" Dib pinched the bridge of his nose. "Like a bug?"

Zim sounded completely exhausted. "Tunoo."

"So you're not contagious."

"No."

"You're not emitting some kind of spore that will make me pull a Kafka?"

"A what?"

"Never mind." The breeze coming through the open window seemed very cold, even though the sun was shining. Dib pulled his coat in close around his body. "If you're not sick, why were you looking for cures?"

Zim curled into a ball. "This is all very painful," he said.

"I see." Dib shifted in his seat. "Well... maybe we can get you an ice pack."

"Ice... pack?"

"You don't know what?" Gravity stopped working correctly on Dib's stomach. He stopped talking.

"You look strange," Zim said.

"Mm." Dib gulped back the extra spit in his mouth and was very still for a moment, and he felt a little better.

The driver's door opened and Gaz got back in. Dib began to wonder if anyone had reported this car stolen. "Where did you learn to hotwire a car?" he asked.

"Somewhere," she said.

Dib was unable to make eye contact with her for some reason. "What else do you know how to do?"

"Stuff." She pulled the car back onto the road.

"Where are we going anyway?" Nothing around here looked familiar.

"To get Dad," she growled.

"You mean we're going to the white bus?" Oh gosh, now he was doing it too. "General Labs?"

Gaz turned and opened one eye at him. "Why are you green?"

Dib shivered. "Oh no! Green? Me?" He looked in the rearview mirror. "Sick green, or alien monster green?" How many paranormal investigators ended up turning into the things they hunted? Dib had known the statistics at some point but he had forgotten them. Maybe he was getting forgetful. Like a stupid alien! And if he was morphing into some kind of Irken- "Wait," he said, shaking his head. "No. That's stupid. That's... really, really stupid."

Gaz raised an eyebrow

"Never mind," Dib said. He tried to find a more comfortable position.

Zim lay down on his side in the backseat and whimpered.

Gaz rounded on him. "I told you to shut up."

Zim sat up. "I apologize."

"Good."

Dib's palm was itching on top of everything else. He glared at it. There was a blotchy red patch on his hand. Ew, did this car have mites or something? Maybe it was a research car filled with radioactive fleas or something. Dib didn't know!

"I'm sorry," Zim said, clasping his hands together. "that my suffering inconveniences you."

"Good," Gaz said, raising her eyebrows.

A tight pink flush was glowing behind Zim's green skin (which was more gray than green today now that Dib looked at it). He wrung his hands, baring his teeth. "I'm sorry that I might *die* in my *prime* on this filthy degenerate ball of *pain* and that's *annoying you*!"

Gaz snorted. "Thanks."

"I notice," Zim announced, "that you are too primitive and feeble to understand that I am in fact *mocking your request that I-*"

Dib fumbled for the handle of the door. They were moving. Couldn't do that. He snatched up one of Gaz's huge empty coffee cups and pulled off the lid, panting shallowly.

Gaz and Zim had both shut up. Dib felt as if his skin was cold baloney. Cold, sticky baloney. Did that make sense? He didn't care.

His hair was lying across his forehead, heavy with sweat. His breath was loud in his ears. "Gaz," he heard himself saying, muffled, as if through a wad of cotton, "you're a... a killer."

Gaz's voice was low. "What?"

"You killed... two people..." Dib retched into the coffee cup and his eyes watered.

Were Gaz and Zim still able to keep a lid on it or had Dib just stopped hearing them? His ears were ringing. Oh no, wait, Gaz was talking. "So?"

She was sitting slouched in her seat with her shoulders up the way she had since she was a little girl, when Dad would dramatically admonish her for tampering with his equipment.

She was still a little girl. Just a little girl. He realized he was saying it aloud. He stopped.

Zim was speaking. "What is wrong with the Dib?"

"I don't know," Gaz replied.

"Well, do something! Repair him, he's clearly damaged!"

"You do it." Dib felt the car swerve. "You're the freaky alien that takes out organs and puts them back!"

Gaz was not a killer. He told himself the first time had been an accident and the second time had been a werewolf. He was being unfair.

"How should I know what's wrong with him?" Zim cried. "He's your brother! I may be incredible but I'm not human- I don't know how all your gibbly meat parts are supposed to... to... meat! I just remove them and occasionally consu- use them for my mission!"

"Then figure out what's wrong with him, and FIX IT!"

"I... I cannot do it!" Zim's voice was shaking. "I'm still not- I mean- I shouldn't be fixing my sworn enemy anyway! If you can't help him, then take him to a human doctor!"

Dib slumped against the passenger window. The glass felt cool on his face. He shut his eyes. Light filtering through the woods they were driving through made weird fuzzy red and black patterns on the inside of his eyelids.

"I'm okay," he said. "You don't have to... I'm sorry, Gaz."

He listened to the steady roar of the engine. Gaz shouldn't be driving at fourteen years old, let alone driving so long, let alone drinking six cups of cheap coffee, let alone stealing the car she was driving, for crying out loud. Where had Dib gone wrong?

Gaz sounded far away. "All right. We're going to go get Dad. Dad is going to fix Dib. Then Dib and I are going to go home, and you are going to go wherever homeless aliens that can't take over the world go."

Dib waited for a replying tantrum from Zim but all he heard was a subdued "Okay, sounds good."

There were a few thumping noises, maybe a restless alien hitting his heels against the seat. "That wolf thing," Zim muttered, "had a collar from the white building. It could have been contaminated. It vomited all over the Dib. Dib could be contaminated!"

"Dad," Gaz growled, "will fix it."

"Okay." The seat cushions creaked as Zim moved around.

His talk about the "wolf thing" being contaminated had jogged Dib's memory. Hadn't there been recent research pointing to a possibility that lycanthropy could be spread by mere blood contact?

If so, Gaz could be in danger. He should get her a check-up with the Eyeballs.

Oh, and Dib could be in danger, too.

Since the werewolf had barfed blood all over him.

Chapter Eight

Tak came out of her repair cycle to find herself lying on some kind of dentist's chair. She swung her legs over the side of the chair and looked down at the floor.

There was a dead human lying crumpled up there with its throat torn out and a scalpel in its hand.

"Oh," Tak said aloud.

"Well," she said.

Now what?

It was dark again and Dib didn't know where he was again. For a moment he wondered if he'd never woken up in the car and that had all been a weird, unpleasant dream.

No, that was dumb.

He was somewhere else now. Sprawled out on his back on something soft and flat, and surrounded by open space.

He opened his eyes and it stayed dark. He was blind.

No, it was just dark.

"Okay, get a grip," Dib said to himself.

Something moved next to him. Dib pulled away, yelping.

Zim yawned loudly and shifted around some more. He was far too close to Dib if Dib could feel him moving. Dib edged away and collided with what felt like someone's back.

Gaz made a sleepy noise of annoyance. Dib sat bolt upright. He felt around carefully- very carefully- and found a blanket and pillow beneath him. Gaz to his right, and Zim to his left. Both recoiled at his touch and made disturbingly similar disparaging noises.

Dib's vision had adjusted enough for him to see that Zim was sitting up and looking around with the shuddering stiffness of the recently awakened.

"Oh, you're up," he said, turning his head in Dib's direction. "I was vigilantly watching you."

"Of course you were," Dib said. Zim sounded more like he'd been vigilantly watching the insides of his eyelids, but he'd rather not split hairs. "Don't watch me sleep ever again."

Gaz was out cold. Well, at least she'd survived her coffee binge.

Whiskery, slippery thin things felt over Dib's face. Irken antennae. Hm. "YARGH!" Dib slapped out at Zam and mused in the dark. "Don't do that!" Icky bug parts! Ick.

"Well, your fever's broken. Grateful as ever, I see!"

"Don't put your dumb alien head feelers on my face!" Dib tried to rub the coolies off his cheeks. "I still think you made me sick."

Gaz muttered in her sleep. Dib would have to keep it down. He stretched. "How long was I asleep?" he whispered.

"Eh?" Zam put his hand to the side of his head where there should be an ear, but wasn't. "What did you say?"

Dib rolled his eyes. "How long was I asleep?" he said louder.

"So very long..." Zam tunneled into the covers.

"Where are we?"

"No more questions," Zam sighed.

"Can you move so I can get out of bed?"

"I said no more questions!"

Dib scooted down to the end of the bed and climbed over the footboard. He stepped in something mushy.

"What did I just step in?" he asked.

"I am very tired of questions, Dib." Zam buried his head in the covers. "If you keep asking them I may have to remove your organs."

"Okay, fine." Dib could make out faint outlines of walls and furniture. He stumbled his way along one wall. He found a lightswitch and flicked it and he choked back a scream.

He was in a hotel room and it had been absolutely trashed. Pizza boxes were littered on the floor, most of them still containing pizza; a lamp had been knocked over; a picture had been knocked off the wall; one pillow had been ripped up and its fluffy innards littered the room; there were stains all over; there were a dozen or so soda cups rolling around on the ground. "What did you guys do?"

"Gaz did all that," Zam said through a muffling layer of hotel room comforter.

"Oh sure. Gaz did all this. Gaz is the one who destroys things just to make me miserable!"
Actually,

Zim sounded as if he thought he was the one who'd been unfairly inconvenienced. Typical. "I've been in bed, waiting to form a chrysalis. As well as making sure you didn't die. And watching your sister have connitch-connutop-connipop-fits because she couldn't find an acceptable brand of pizza. She was greatly annoying to me. I put a light sedative in her fizzy drink thing." Zim flipped one hand in the air dismissively. "Now, she sleeps. You're welcome."

"Wow." Dib said, running his fingers through his hair and surveying the mess on the floor. "You just said some of the worst things I've ever heard."

Gaz snored.

Dib sat down on the side of the bed next to Zim. His shoulders slumped forward. "Is there any pizza left that's not rotting on the floor?"

"I don't know."

Dib got up and checked the little mini-fridge. There was one small piece left. He scarfed it down. The little bedside clock said 11:45. Dib had slept for nearly twelve hours. After waking up very briefly in the car.

He sat back down on the bed. Zim rolled over onto his back. He blinked large, dull, pleading eyes at Dib. "What's an ice pack?"

"What?"

"You said you'd get me an ice pack."

"I can't." Dib didn't remember saying that at all. "I don't have one."

Zim actually stuck his lower lip out like a four-year-old.

Dib shook his head. "You don't even know what an ice pack is, why do you want one?"

"You said it would help me." Zim's eyes narrowed. "You lied, didn't you? I should have known. You just take and take and-"

"Help you with what?"

"My back is *killing me!*" he squeaked.

"Oh." Dib sighed. "Let me look at it."

Zim flopped onto his face, moaning. The area above his Pak was visibly swollen. "Ew," Dib said.

Zim jumped and looked over his shoulder. "What? What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing, it's just kinda swollen... you're just gross." Dib flopped down on his back. "What are we going to do?"

"Mm." Zim burrowed into the covers.

Dib watched the ceiling fan go slowly around and around, lying between his sister and a cantankerous moron from another planet, and wondered how his life had brought him to this point.

"Tak!"

She cried out. She'd forgotten about Skoolge. But now she remembered. "You! You were supposed to intervene if anything dangerous happened!"

"I tried but, um, I've kind of been captured!"

She shook her head. "There is no 'kind of' captured! You're either captured or you're not!"

"I... might have been captured! Sir!"

"There is no 'might have been'! Are you in captivity or are you free? This shouldn't be difficult!"

"I'm in a cage!"

"Then you've been captured!" she nearly screamed. "So let me get this straight: You were supposed to help me if anything happened but instead... you're in a cage and I have to free you! What's wrong with this picture?"

He said nothing.

Tak sighed. "Fine. I'm busy at the moment. You'll have to hold on for a while and... try not to be killed."

She reached up and turned off the radio. All right, now what? She surveyed the corpse on the floor.

Staring at the dead scientist would do her no good. She examined her own body for injuries.

"What?" she said to herself. Half of one pant leg and a boot was missing from her left leg, leaving her with a bare calf, ankle, and foot. She mentally accessed her Pak's bodily repairs report. Okay... so, apparently, her leg had been severed when she was unconscious, and she had regrown it.

"All right, severed by what?" she said, and of course there was no answer.

Chills shuddered up her back. She shook them off.

She carefully picked her way over the dead human and went out into the hallway. Zim had been terrified of these people, and she had thought it was nothing.

Well, of course she had! He was an idiot!

But of course he was the kind of idiot that didn't recognize danger when it was staring him in the face. She fiddled with her gloves. Now that she thought about it, if the Irken who literally could not tell the difference between love and hate had thought a bunch of people were out to get him, wasn't it possible that they were in fact even *more* out to get him than he knew, not less?

She heard a noise, a soft scuttling, but couldn't pinpoint where it was coming from. She tried looking inside the nearest room. A limp human was on the floor. It smelled dead and it was staring sightlessly at the ceiling. There were smears of blood on its throat and waist. Upon closer inspection, its back was broken.

She studied it for a minute, and then closed its dead eyes before leaving the room.

She found two more corpses in the next room. One was strapped to a table, its throat torn out. Tak had a crawling sensation all over her skin now. She turned her radio back on. "Skoodge?"

"Yeah?"

"Where are you right now?"

"I'm in the base."

Her heart was beating fast. "They got into the base?"

"No."

"Then how?" Tak had a dark suspicion. "Skoodge, did you... trap yourself somehow?"
He was far too quiet.

Tak fought an urge to bludgeon herself senseless. "It's okay, though! I can call someone to get me out!" Skoodge said.

"Fine." Tak said, terminating the connection. Then she realized. She turned the line back on. "Skoodge? What someone? What do you mean?"

The line was busy.

"Skoodge! Do not dare call-" Too late, apparently.

She ended the call, sighed, and looked around at the empty, echoing hallway. She heard a distant dripping noise. She shuddered. Perhaps she should have simply destroyed the place instead of going in to gather information.

"Skoodge?"

Zim felt a little weak and dizzy and he wasn't entirely sure he could trust his eyes at the moment, especially since Skoodge was supposed to be dead. "Aren't you dead?" he asked. Wait! "Am I dead?"

Skoodge's eyes were big and round. And wali-eyed. and piggy. and ugly. just as Zim remembered. "Heck, I don't know! You might be! You look awful!"

Zim blinked a few times. Here was Skoodge, who had stayed in Zim's base without permission for months, and then up and left one night without saying goodbye. and now he had called out of the blue and was insulting him. "Why have you contacted me? I'm unbelievably busy!"

"Well- I'm on a direct mission from the Tallest, on Earth-"

Zim sat bolt upright. His head spun and he fell backwards. He might be hallucinating this whole thing.. he felt a little feverish..

"Are you okay?" Skoodge asked.

"Shut up." Gaz muttered. She'd woken up, unfortunately. Now she was sitting on the couch playing her little game thing while waiting for Dib to finish a long-overdue shower. Zim could also use a shower by now. Not in an Earth bathroom, of course. he'd melt.

"This is important." Zim snapped at her. He forced himself into a sitting position and directed his attention back towards Skoodge. "I'M on a direct mission from the Tallest from Earth."

Skoodge shook his head. "I know, sure, but mine's different. There's this building I'm supposed to help someone destroy-"

"What? That's what I'm doing! The Tallest sent you to help me!" The Tallest thought he needed help. From SKOODGE. They might as well have come to Earth themselves and slapped him.

"No, I'm helping Tak. Oh, you probably don't know who that is. She-"

Zim heard an undignified strangled squeaky noise. and realized it was himself. "Tak? How can she be-" He cried out and his body folded itself in half.

"Quit whining!" Gaz snapped.
Zim hissed at her.

"Now what?" Dib snapped, his voice muffled by the running shower and the closed bathroom door.

"Nothing. I'm fine!" Zim called, pushing himself up into a sitting position. His squeedly-sprooch was cramping up. Maybe he was allergic to those donuts Dib had brought them after all. or maybe this was related to the change. or maybe he was sick of trying to figure out what his body was doing and why and just didn't stinking care anymore.

Skoodge frowned. "Are you okay? Why are Dib and Gaz there?"

"Never mind!" Zim didn't think he owed Skoodge anything at this point. "Where are you?"

Skoodge gave the co-ordinates of a location very near to the white building. Of course, Zim carefully slid off the edge of the bed and got to his feet. "I'll be there shortly. Don't screw up before I get there." He snorted. "Sit on the floor wherever you are and don't touch anything."

"It didn't take *me* three years to conquer a planet!"

Zim stared at Skoodge's holographic projection.

"Sir," Skoodge added.

Zim terminated the call.

"I'm trying to concentrate." Gaz said from the couch. "I never asked for a stupid alien to drag my brother into a stupid building and—"

Zim cut her off. "Whatever, I'm leaving."

"You can't leave now." Gaz turned around in her seat, opening her eyes at him. "We're stuck here now!"

"Tot bad." Zim snapped. His head was pounding and his skin was clammy. He would have to work through it. Maybe he'd feel better after some fresh air. Oh, right, this was Earth and everything stunk.

Dib had gone out to a convenience store and gotten some supplies—human stuff, mostly. He'd bought himself some new clothes to change into after his shower.

It was cold outside. Zim grabbed the jacket Dib had bought, put it on, and rolled up the sleeves. He couldn't quite reach the top of the dresser where Dib had left the card key to the hotel room. Oh well, he probably wouldn't be coming back to this place.

Gaz was watching him. He glared at her.

"Fine." Her eyes closed and she turned back to her game. "Go. You're useless anyway."

"Enh," Zim muttered. He headed for the door and reached up to open it and his knees buckled. He wound up crouching on the floor with his head resting against the door. His own breathing sounded very loud and harsh. He tried to call for Dib but could only sputter.

"I thought you were leaving," Gaz said.

Zim shivered.

Eons passed. The bathroom door popped open and he heard Dib rattling around. "Where's that jacket I bought?" the human demanded.

"Your stupid alien took it," Gaz answered.

"He's not my—" Dib's footsteps came closer. "Oh boy—" he muttered. "What now?" Zim whimpered. His throat was all locked up and he couldn't speak. His whole body had frozen into an aching knot. He'd forgotten all about Skoodge.

"You took my jacket," Dib said. "That's mine."

Zim's time had run out and his Pak was going to fall off and he was going to die. He didn't even know why. He'd never bothered finding out exactly what 'buds' meant, but obviously something bad was happening. Perhaps he was sprouting mutant arms.

Dib slid one arm under Zim's body and scooped him up, leaning him against his chest. He started trying to tug the jacket off.

"Yeah, nevermind, I don't want it now anyway," Dib muttered. He carried Zim across the room and sat down on the bed. "Gaz, what happened?"

"He's been like that," Gaz grunted. "The whole time you were asleep he just sat there."

"Not like this! He's burning up! Do you think he's going to form a chrysalis like he said?" Zim had just been saying that to disturb Dib, but now it all sounded entirely plausible.

"I don't know! He's your alien!" Gaz was saying.

"He's not my alien! For crying out loud! I don't even want an alien!"

"Then stop carrying him around like that!"

Dib had picked him up so easily. Dib could probably snap Zim over his knee like a twig if he wanted to. Not that it really mattered now anyway.

"Why does carrying him from the door to the bed imply some kind of ownership? Anyway, I can't put him down. He can't walk," Dib said. "I'm not going to just leave him here for some innocent, unsuspecting maid to find! He steals organs, you know."

Zim could think of worse places to die than in the arms of someone who truly hated him. At least Dib would appreciate it.

He rested his head against Dib's arm. It was too late now, he was going to end up dead or altered, so why fight it anymore? At least he wouldn't have to go back to the white building now.

"Come on—" Dib was muttering, shaking his shoulder. "Wake up. I know you're not really gonna die, Zim. You never do. Stop yanking me around!"

Zim said nothing.

Tak found a dead security guard sitting on the floor. She tried the door he was slumped next to and it opened.

She was looking into a dark hallway. Clearly, something important was in it, or had been in it. She headed down the hall. It was so quiet in here. Her steps were awkwardly uneven, wearing only one boot. She wondered why she hadn't been killed herself. She'd been left alone and unconscious in an unlocked room. Maybe whatever had killed all these humans didn't have a taste for Irken flesh.

Something thumped.
Tak's heart thumped.

She inched down the hallway. She reactivated her hologram disguise. It was sloppy of her not to have done so before now, she realized. She'd been assuming everyone here was dead.

Assumptions were sloppy.

The thumping was coming from behind one particular door. She reached up for the doorknob, took a deep breath and turned it.

A human with one arm stood there. The stump of his other arm had a bloody tourniquet on it. Tak staggered backwards with an undignified yelp.
He wasn't carrying weapons, he wasn't oozing anything but some very normal blood, and he looked familiar.

"I consider myself a reasonable man, however, this appalling incident has left me with a thirst for vengeance!" The man gesticulated wildly with his remaining arm.

Tak blinked. "D... Dib?" Humans grew quickly. Dib could have reached this height after three years.

"No, little girl. I'm not INSANE!" Oh, this was his father. She hadn't recognized him without the coat he wore in all of the footage of Dib's family she'd analyzed. "Now, this is no place for children!"

"No, it isn't, shall we depart?"

"At once! I need to get back to my laboratory to select a suitable arm substitute. Follow me!" He marched down the hall.

She followed, wondering if he'd noticed all the corpses yet.

Dib stopped the car without warning. Gaz opened one eye at him.

"Well, he said chrysalis and it's obviously a cocoon," Dib said. His voice was shaky, he realized. Well, this was a horrible situation in every way, that was why. "He lied."

"There's a difference?" Gaz asked.

"A chrysalis is a skin and a cocoon is silk. Don't you pay any attention in bio class? That's a ball of silk. He's like a spider. It's disgusting!"

Gaz glanced into the backseat. There was indeed a big ball of gray insect silk back there, and it was sticky, and Dib had gotten patches of gray fuzz stuck to his face and arms getting it into the car. The cocoon was large and awkward and hard to carry. It smelled like glue. Gaz had not offered to help with it. "Except spiders don't make cocoons, they make webs," Dib acknowledged. "I thought Zim was an adult! Why is he pupating?"

"Ew, he's doing what?"

"What's he turning into? Could he always spin silk like that?" And if he had, did the silk not have any offensive or defensive capabilities or had Zim just not considered those capabilities useful? Gaz shrugged. Either she had a great capacity for keeping her cool or she didn't understand how serious this was.

"Moths make cocoons," Dib said, picking some silk off his chin. "His back was kind of puffy. Gaz, I don't need him to be able to fly- well, I don't know, he has a spaceship and rockets and GIR flies him around now, I guess it's not a huge deal if he learns to fly under his own power. I should worry more about... growth, or carnivorous behavior." He cried out. "Gaz! What if his adult stage is coprophagous, like GIR? That would be really gross!"

"Drive," Gaz said.

Fine, Dib supposed nothing would fix itself if they just sat here. He eased back out onto the road. "What if he loses some of his weaknesses? I rely on those weaknesses, Gaz. If nothing else, I use them for entertainment!"

"You could roll him under the car and run him over," Gaz said.

Dib had already thought of that. "No, that wouldn't leave much to study. I should turn him over to science while he's immobile, though..."

"After we get Dad."

"After we get Dad," Dib agreed.

He glanced in the rearview mirror at the cocoon. At least Zim wasn't shrieking or complaining or doing alarming alien things or threatening to kill him anymore.

"Press B," Gaz said.

Dib scrunched up his nose. "What?"

"Zim is evolving. Press B."

He didn't get it. Gaz shook her head and looked away.

Dib squinted out the windshield. "Does the air look oddly green to you?"
He pulled over.

"What are you doing?"

"Everything does look green. What if it's going to storm?"

"Then we should try to get there faster!"

Dib took his hands off the wheel.

"Let me drive," Gaz said.

"I think we're caught in a tractor beam."

"No, we aren't!" Gaz opened the door and looked out. She slammed the door, grunting her irritation.

"I told you so."

"Fix it!"

Dib rolled down his window and looked out. Evil laughter was coming from somewhere above them. Dib didn't really have any capacity to be surprised anymore.

"Surrender or be exterminated!" a somewhat nasal voice yelled.

"That voice sounds familiar," Dib said aloud, mostly to himself.

"Dib?" The voice sounded shocked. The car did not stop rising into the air. "Oh, thank goodness it's you!"

The car rose sharply, knocking Dib back into the car, and then fell onto a flat surface with a jolt. Zim's cocoon rolled off the backseat onto the floor. Gaz undid her seatbelt and got out of the car, Dib following.

They were in some kind of metal alien room with cables all over the ceiling like in Zim's house, or rather, Zim's ex-house. Half the room was walled off with force field. A short, chubby Irken was in that half along with some controls and screens which he'd apparently used to work the tractor beam. His little hands were pressed up against the field. "I'm stuck!" he said. "Pull the lever, Dib!"

Dib's eyebrows rose. He knew that Irken. "Skoodge? I kinda thought you were dead."

Skoodge shrugged. "Yeah, well. Happens."

"Put us back," Gaz growled. "How did you get in there?"
Skoodge shrugged again.

Dib went over and pulled the lever to turn off the force field. Why not? Skoodge certainly wasn't a threat and he probably wouldn't cooperate until he got what he wanted. "Okay, Skoodge, what's going on?"

Skoodge did a little jig of freedom. "Never do that again," Dib said.

"Tell him to put us back," Gaz said.

"Maybe he can help us get Dad."

Gaz scowled but didn't argue. "Oh, yeah, your dad!" Skoodge said. "He's in the gray building."

What... "Gray?"

Skoodge walked over to a bank of screens. "Yeah, there he is!"

Dib and Gaz went over for a look. Dad was walking down the hall next to a young girl.

"I can't see him too well but he looks okay," Dib muttered. "Who's that girl?"

Skoodge shifted from foot to foot. He scowled. "That's mission-specific."

Dib rolled his eyes. "Oh, come on! Is she going to do anything to my dad?"

"I don't know! I don't know what's going on."

The girl took something out of her backpack and Dad toppled over.

Dib squeaked. There was a burst of static. Dib jumped. Skoodge pressed a button under the bank of screens.

"Skoodge!" It was a female voice with a slight English accent. The girl on the screen was talking. It must be her on the radio. "I've found Professor Membrane. He's alive and appears unmutated. I've stunned him. Are you still... stuck?"

"No, I captured some humans and they let me out," Skoodge said.

"You did what?" She sounded familiar. Suspiciously familiar. "You- ugh! Never mind. Just trap them somewhere and come help me with this human. He should have something useful to tell us. And he's heavy. The building appears to be deserted, you shouldn't have any trouble. Just avoid stepping in anything."

"Right away!" Skoodge saluted.